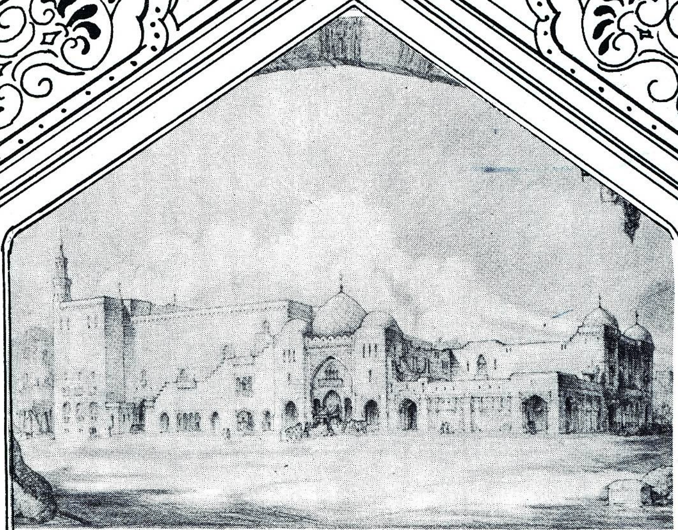
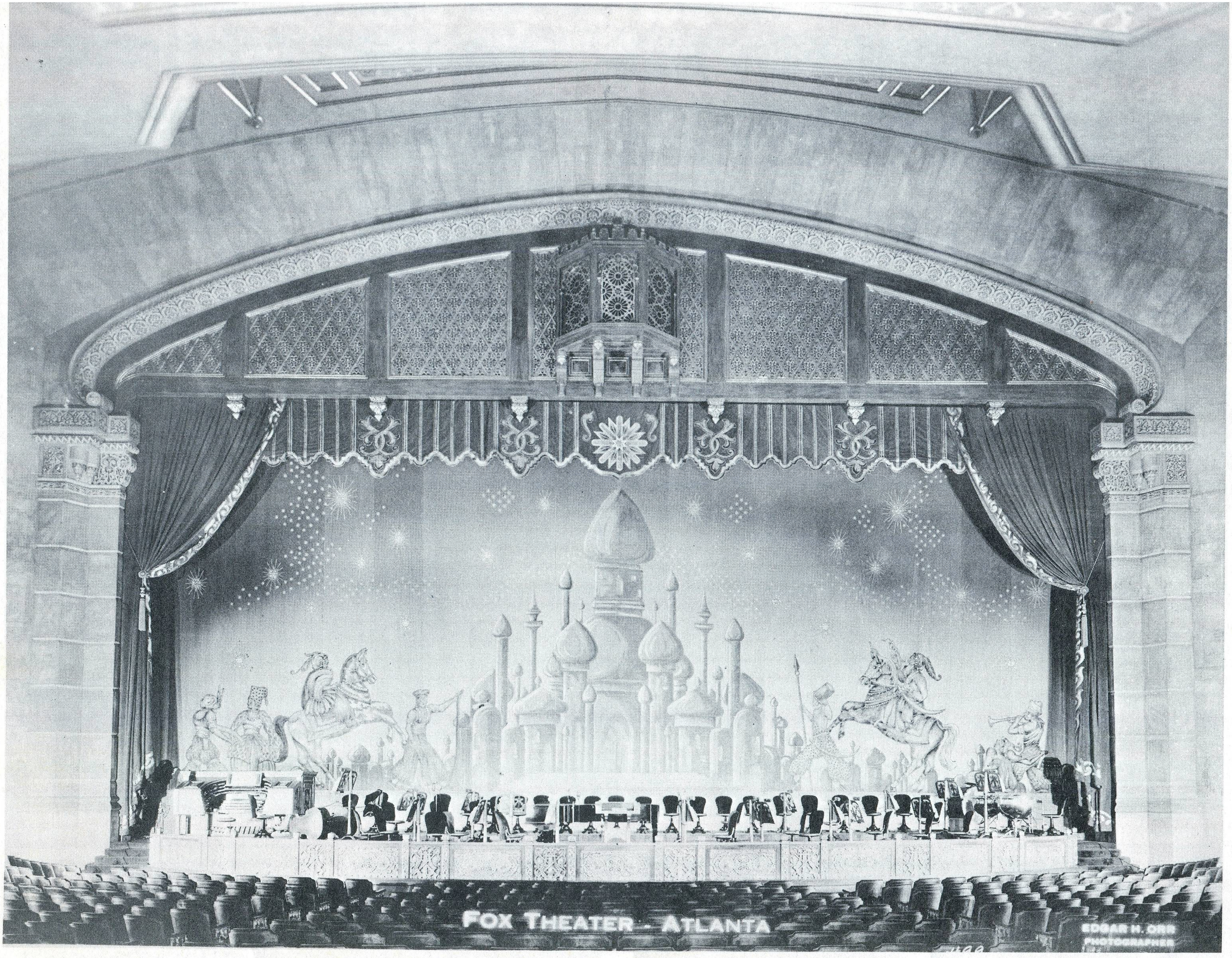


Atlanta FOX Album

Mecca at Peachtree Street

by John Clark McCall, Jr.

Reprinted and revised through the courtesy of *The Console*, Tom B'Hend, editor.


FOX THEATER - ATLANTA
EDGAR H. ORR
PHOTOGRAPHER

1. An Architectural Appreciation

In the short, furious period of movie palace architecture – offspring of nearly two decades unique to Western civilization – America saw a campaign of theatre construction that made gold leaf, ponderous chandeliers, and the Mighty Wurlitzer the *rule* and not the exception. The campaign left its imprint on America's large urban areas as well as its small towns. At best, only the scale was altered.

What, then, makes Atlanta's Fox Theatre more than just another movie palace, more than simply a relic testifying the age in which it materialized, and most importantly, a structure that has the merit to stand indefinitely?

The reasons are parallel to the history of the original Fox plans – plans which were not actually those of "Fox" at all . . .

1928 saw a bustling Atlanta with its own "great white way" – Peachtree Street and the busy marquee lights of the Metropolitan, Paramount, Georgia, Capitol, Grand, and the new Erlanger. The Atlanta theatre scene was indeed precariously overgrown.

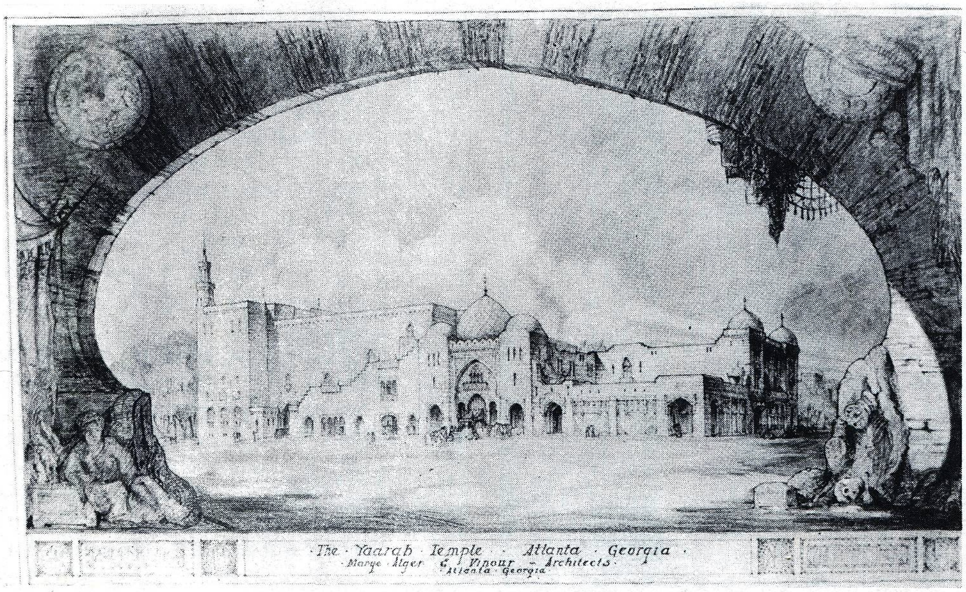
In addition to the large downtown houses, the smaller grind houses and community theatres appeared at most every cluster of suburban Spanish-tiled shops – including Atlanta's West End, Tenth Street area, East Atlanta, Inman Park, and at Georgia Avenue. When the Atlanta newspapers carried announcements for a new headquarters for the Yaarab Temple of the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine in early 1928, plans for the Fox Theatre were yet to materialize. What existed on the drawing boards of Atlanta architects Marye, Alger, and Vinour was a 200 by 400-foot block of cream and buff-colored brick to house the Yaarab Temple. The style source was akin to that of the far-Eastern cultures, from ballrooms, offices, shops, to the huge temple auditorium designed to accomodate nearly 5,000 loyal followers.

P. Thornton Marye's charge from the Shrine's chief potentate, Tom Law, was to design a lasting monument that would out-Baghdad Baghdad. And the blueprints came close, but it was increasingly obvious that the first prayer tower would never be raised unless sufficient funds could be secured to finance construction. Fortunately, William K. Fox – riding high on his movie empire – was in the midst of establishing six new super picture palaces throughout the country, including two Siamese/Burmese twins in St. Louis and Detroit. In the scheme of far-Eastern flavor lavished on these two theatres, the proposed Atlanta Yaarab Temple's architectural character seemed in step. And in the architects' parlance, Fox's collective theatre empire would be balanced with the French rococo image of the Brooklyn and San Francisco Fox theatres.

The Fox Theatre Corporation secured a 21-year lease on the future Atlanta theatre – materializing in a $3,000,000 aggregate rental fee, payable on the "installment plan" for

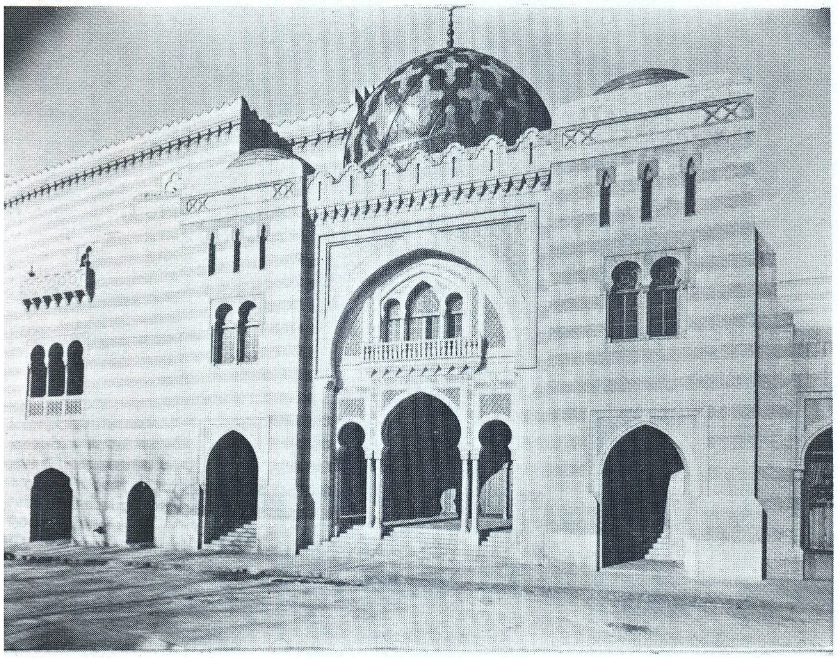
---

* As Robert Foreman points out in his article, "The Fabulous Fox Theatre" (February 1974), there are no accurate figures regarding the actual cost of the Fox. Mr. Foreman states, "Estimates range from one and one-half to five-million dollars. Three-million dollars, however, would seem to be the most reliable figure since it is the most often cited in publications of the late 1920's and 1930's."



Original artist's rendering of the Yaarab Temple exterior. Minor changes followed after the Fox-Shrine partnership.

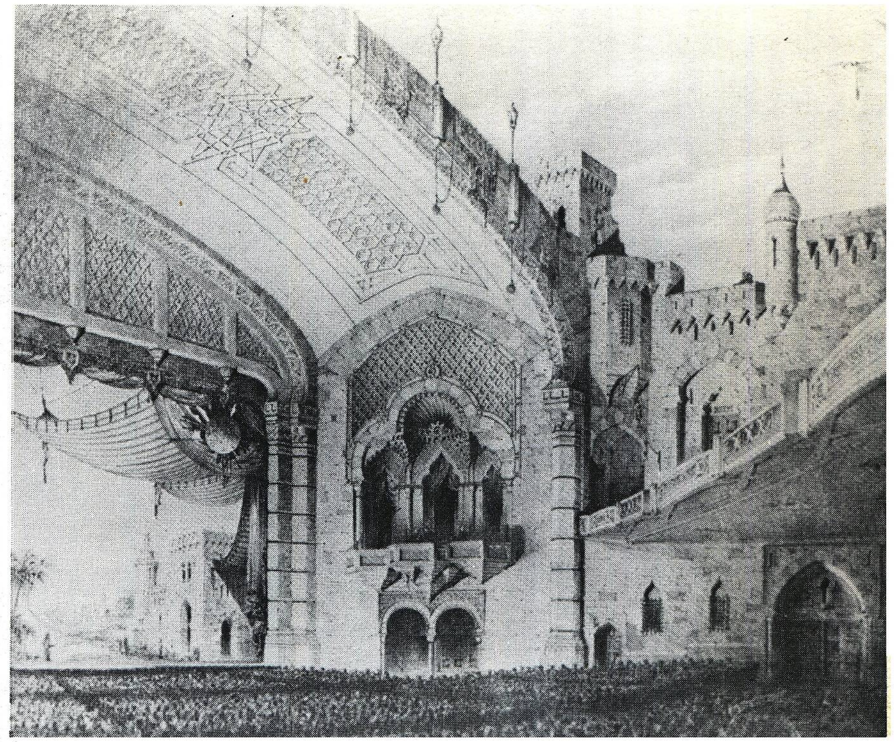
–from The Console Collection





Exterior of the Yaarab Temple as it appeared from Kimball Street in 1929. Entrance topped with large onion dome was originally intended as the main building entrance. Fire exits from balcony level to street are integral with the building design as seen just to the left of the dome. From this one view can be seen examples and variations of at least four styles of arches: the Four-centered Arch, Lancet arch, Ogee arch, and the Horseshoe arch.

—Edgar Orr photos



Amazingly realistic artist's rendering of the Fox auditorium, although the theatre is not as commodius as the head count depicted here.
—from The Console Collection

the length of the lease period. The Shriners, in turn, gained construction money, executive offices, and the use of the auditorium for at least six times yearly for ceremonies, initiations, and special feast days.

After the news reports of the Fox-Shrine marriage, Atlanta became curious as the $3,000,000* structure began to rise at the corner of Peachtree and Kimball (later an extension of Ponce de Leon Avenue) Streets – further out Atlanta's white way than the Erlanger!

William Fox moved in, or rather, his inventive wife, Eve, did and began a campaign of furnishing the house while saving the Fox Theatre Corporation untold decorator's fees. Just as the Atlanta Howard had explored the Georgian and Elizabethan styles along with its Italian theme, the resourceful Eve Fox brought to the Fox's retiring rooms and loggias a sampling of the breadth of her tours in the Eastern cultures – to include the associated styles of the Turks and Egyptians. These various styles altered between rooms at the lower level and those at balcony level.

But it was not Eve Fox's bazaar finds that made the Fox. Perhaps the sheer dimensions of the auditorium prompted visual excitement. The true-to-style treatment of the audience area as a courtyard surrounded by structure, rather than a room whose interior was smothered with an assortment of ornamental devices and fabric allows the theatre, even today, a look of subtle establishment and tastefulness. And taste and forethought often escaped the designer/craftsmen of the movie palace school. The architectural features which are *absent* have given the Atlanta Fox design a timeless visage, making it unnecessary to employ usual architectural verbiage. Furthermore, the Atlanta Fox had a real basis for its far-Eastern design (as a Shrine), unlike most structures built strictly as theatres.

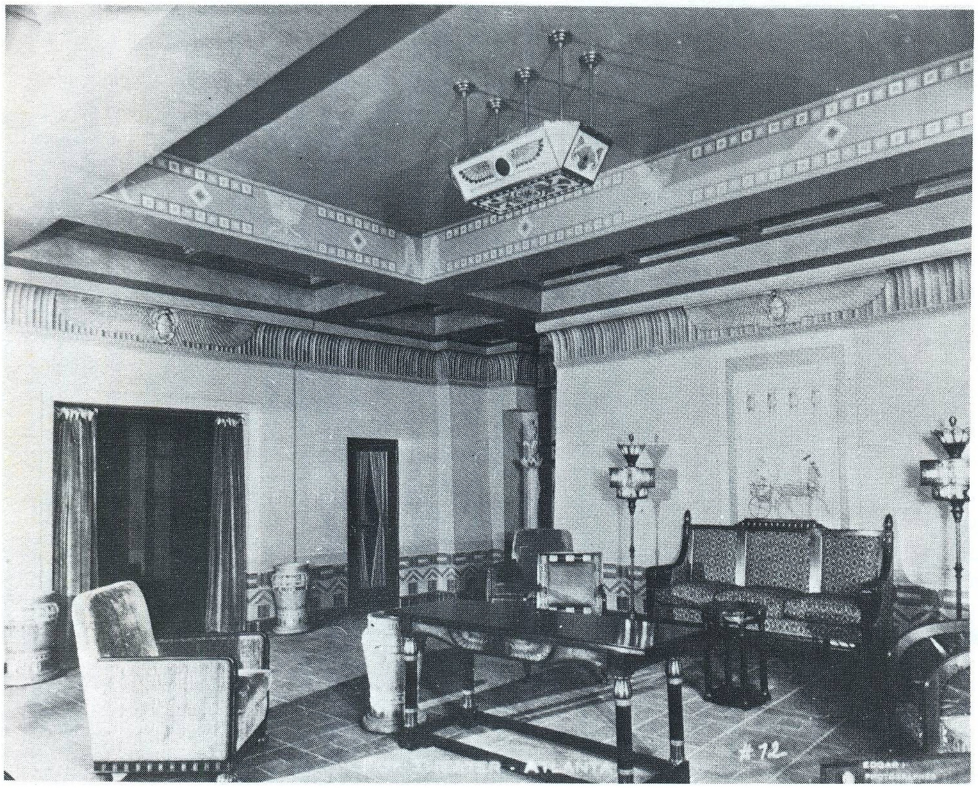
The Fox's exterior treatment should receive the first accolade. Few American theatres received a building site that would allow the architects' greatest talents to come to the forefront. Through lack of funds or space, the economics of stashing a theatre behind a hotel or office structure pervaded the theatre building boom of the twenties and early thirities. The Fox exterior is an exception, and its courses of cream and buff brick surplanted with sections of tile, tabby, and domed minarets give the theatre patron an expectation of the magic to be found inside. Marye, Alger and Vinour's treatment of the Ponce de Leon Avenue fire exits are integral with the building and lend interest to the structure (unlike the usual iron "skeletons" of most theatre fire escapes).

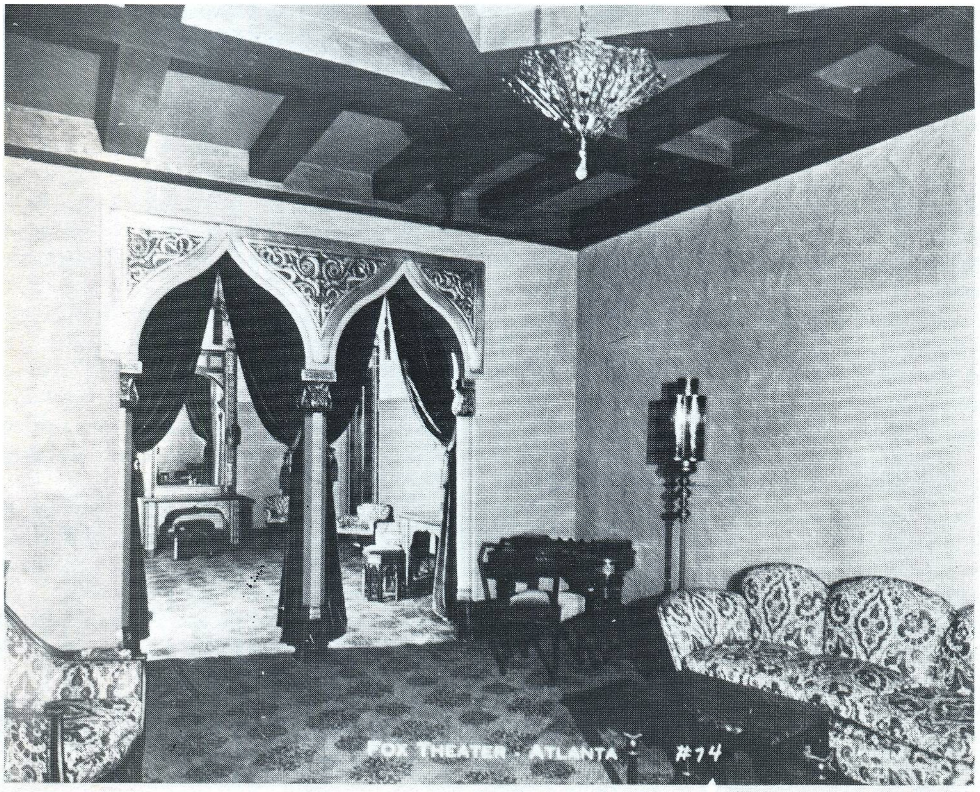
Originally, the Shrine's main entrance was to be the center of the Ponce de Leon Avenue frontage. Above the arabesqued entrance was the largest of the Fox "onion" domes adorned with a ribbed latticework. But with the intervention of William Fox, a Peachtree Street entrance was preferred, and it was here that the large vertical sign and marquee were installed.

Access to the theatre lobby is by a 140-foot-deep loggia lined with windows of the Peachtree shops, the Shrine offices (now offices for Georgia Theatre Company), and main ballroom entrances. Various textured plaster reliefs, filigreed lamps, tile, and terrazzo flooring are integral factors of the loggia design – a boon for captivating and protecting the next show's patrons from inclement weather.

The Fox lobby is certainly the most understated in the Fox super chain, but the rectangular area is a centrex for access to all major arteries of the theatre: the auditorium, backstage areas, Ponce de Leon Avenue exits, balconies,

(text continued on page 12)



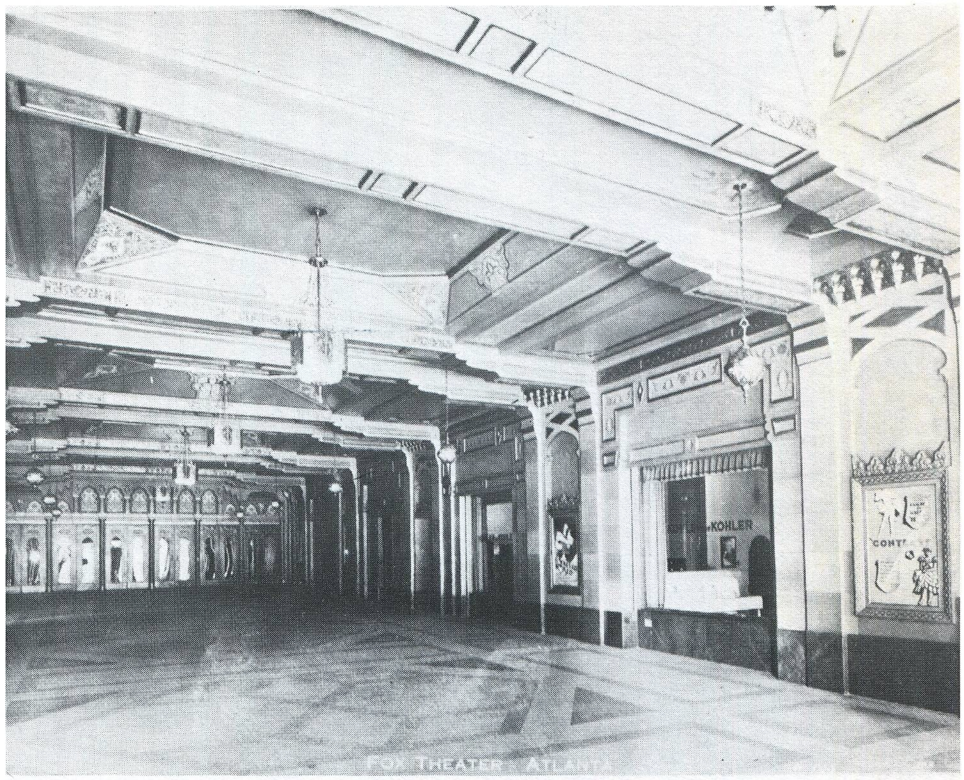


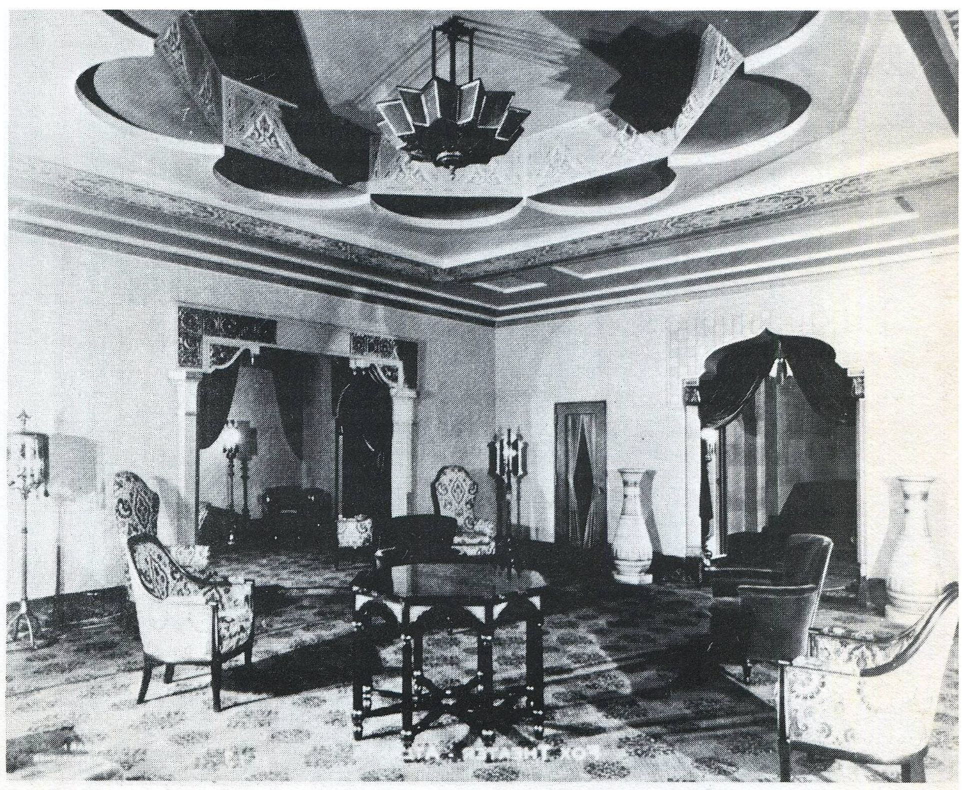
(top) Men's lounge at the lower level is in direct contrast to ladies' counterpart. The discovery of the tomb of Pharoh Tutankhamen in 1922 obviously had bearing on the use of period Egyptian decor in rooms such as this.

–Edgar Orr photo

(bottom) View of a ladies lounge area. Note "wooden" beams overhead – actually of cast plaster.

–Edgar Orr photo



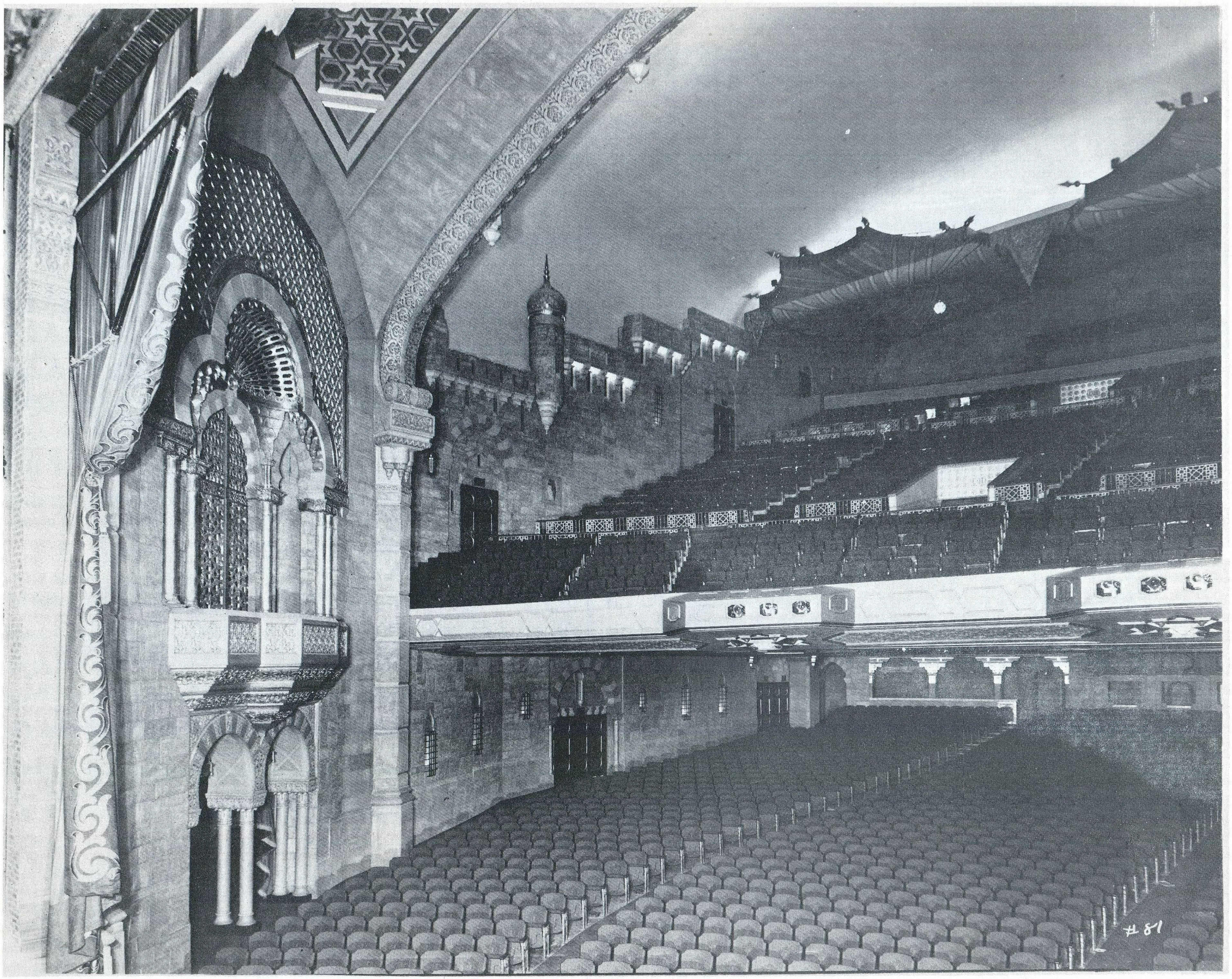


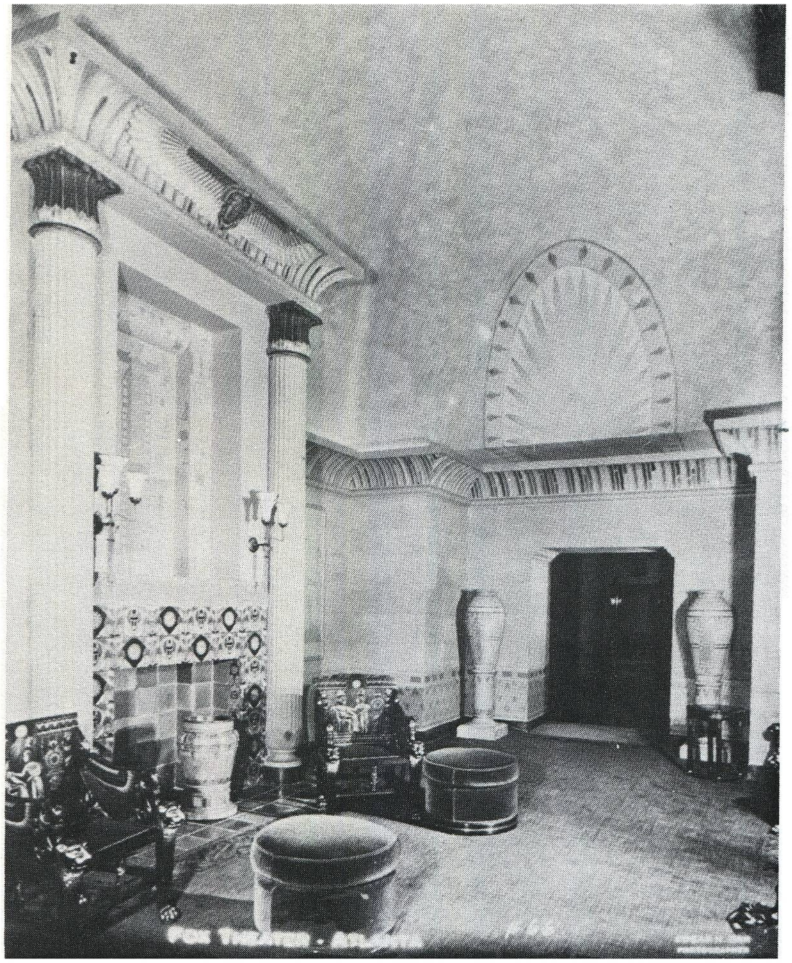
(top) Loggia as viewed by the patron entering from Peachtree Street. The hand-painted ceiling detail is somewhat conservative in this 1929 shot; later restoration included more elaborate designs over more area of the ceiling coffers. Announcement board at extreme right announces the current Fanchon and Marco stage "idea," "Contrasts."

–Edgar Orr photo

(bottom) Ladies lounge at the lower level. Note caisson in ceiling to set off light fixture. Built-in telephone booth is to the right of the arched entranceway.

–Edgar Orr photo


#81





(opposite page) View from the stage. Note Brenograph's "clouds" in the Fox's atmospheric ceiling.

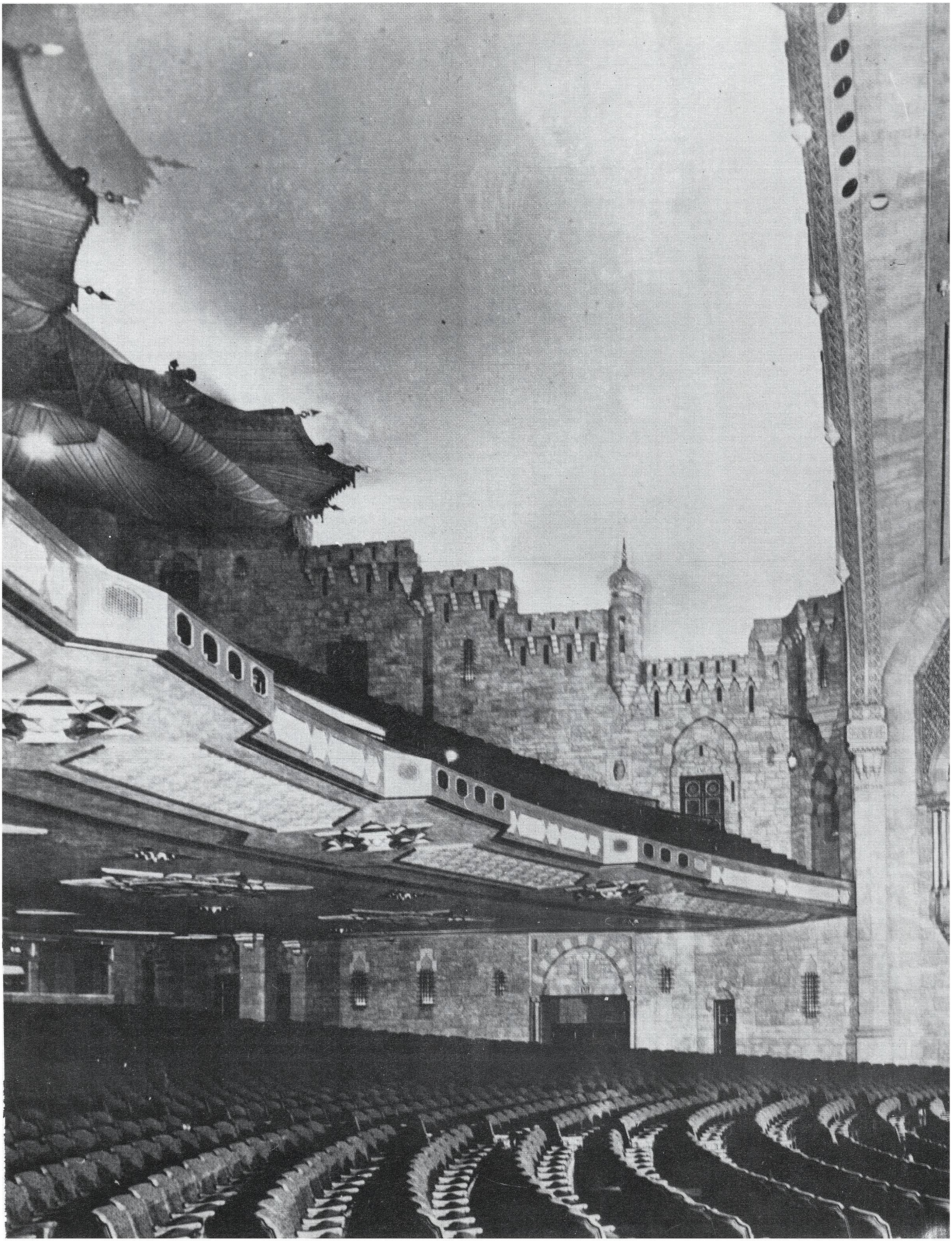
–Edgar Orr photo

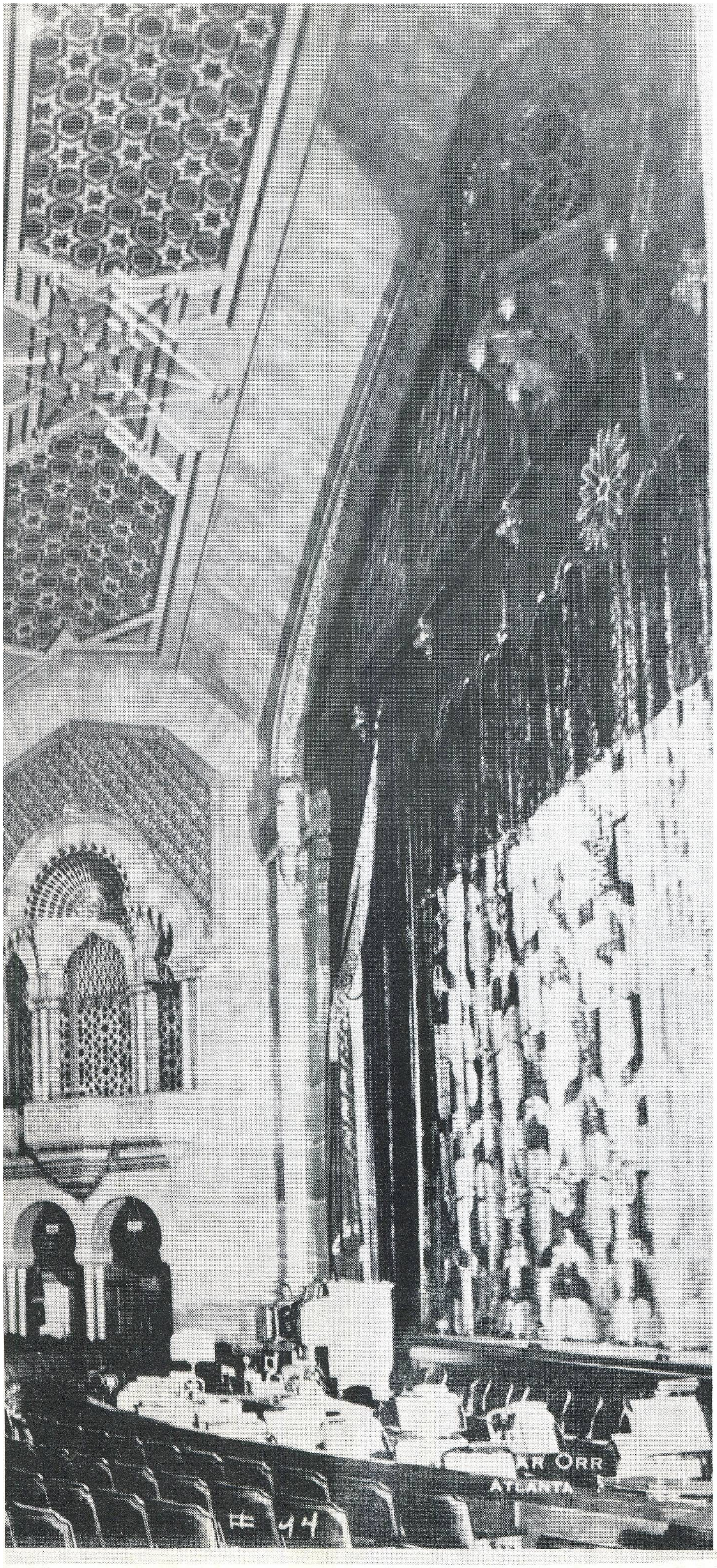
(top) One of the most impressive of the Fox's retiring rooms. This ladies' lounge foyer, at the mezzanine level, features scarab motif in its surface decoration.

–Edgar Orr photo

(bottom) View of staircase descending from mezzanine to lobby. Entrance to the Egyptian ballroom is through ebony double doors at upper right.

–Edgar Orr photo





The most familiar view of the Fox auditorium showing the trefoil arch of the left organ grille. Architect Marye said of his firm's handiwork, "The open air illusion was largely secured by the depth of color in the sky . . . The ornamentation necessary to receive the somberness of mass masonry was secured by introducing burnished metal grilles and screens and studied light effects . . ."



Promenade at the Dress Circle level is pure Arabic with repetition of arches ending in tile platforms on which light fixtures rest.

—Edgar Orr photo

lounges, and ballroom. The lobby is flanked with two separate stairways leading to the balcony and dress circle. This access is augmented with elevators (executed in parqueted linoleum and hand-tooled and painted leather interiors). A small atrium is situated to the front of the auditorium entrance open to the second story balcony level. Featured are a hand-painted mural draped with canvas awnings and an atmospheric ceiling treatment. The vast ambience afforded the auditorium proper – over 65,000 square-feet of space – is not realized until midway orchestra level, at the end of the underside of the balcony. Here lies an open view of the Fox atmospheric ceiling treatment, a view of the immense depth of the balcony and dress circle, and proscenium arch. The sides of the auditorium are treated as castellated walls with dimly lit barred windows, minarets, and the associated devices of a Far-Eastern fortress. Overhead, the Fox's very believable stars and moving clouds attest to the architects' study of correct stellar groupings and atmospheric conditions. Flanking either side of the stage are the warmest and most ornamental features of the auditorium – pierced gold-finished organ grilles visually "supported" by false balcony boxes at the base. Unlike many atmospheric houses, the Fox's sky area ends long before the stage opening at an arched bridge lined with lanterns (denoting a more European than Far-Eastern flavor). Underneath the organ grilles, at floor level, are arched exits to which the stage area and orchestra pit nearly span. At the center of the proscenium arch is a projecting casement – resembling an organ chamber for a fanfare division. In reality, the casement houses a stationary vitaphone speaker. Obviously, much of the Fox's intrigue rests with its infinite detail and endless features of innovation and design. But overall, it possesses a strong, unified appearance.

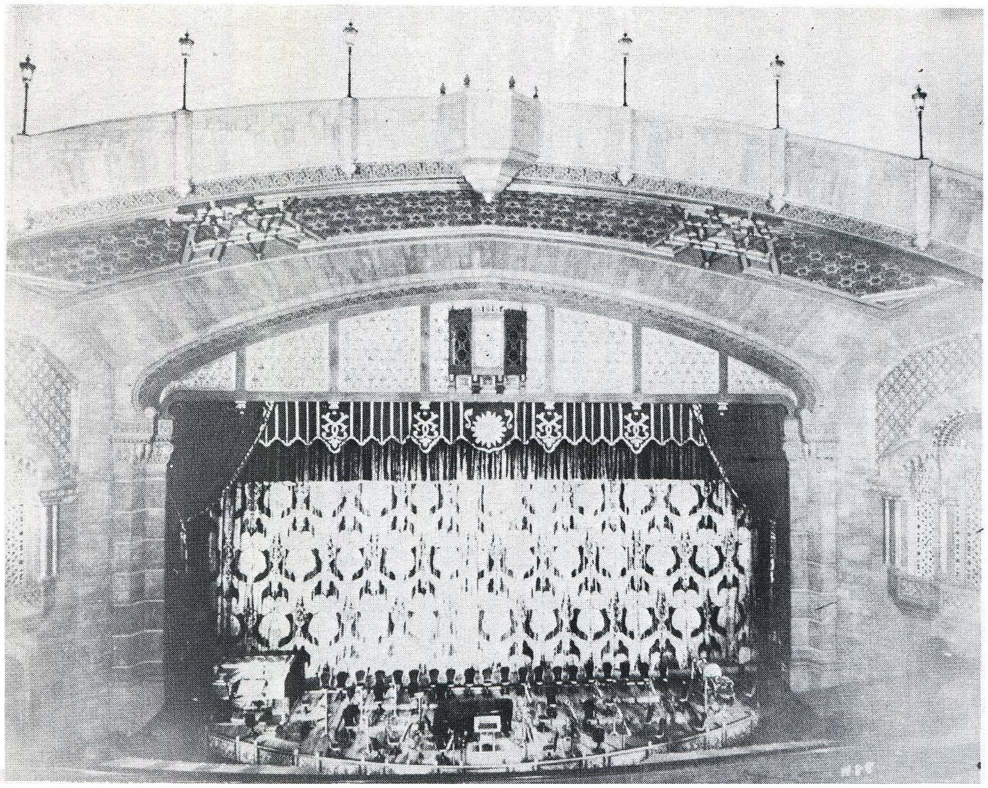
Readers will not be burdened with the usual variety of "wonder" claims that were delegated to movie palaces including the Fox, spanning boasts of the energy produced by its power plants, to isolated features being the "largest in the world," etc. What is important is the Fox's general design statement – in not only an ornamental sense, but in a technical sense: elements such as traffic patterns, sightlines, acoustics, and audience comfort. The architectural features contributing to *these* ends are the Fox's true wonders.

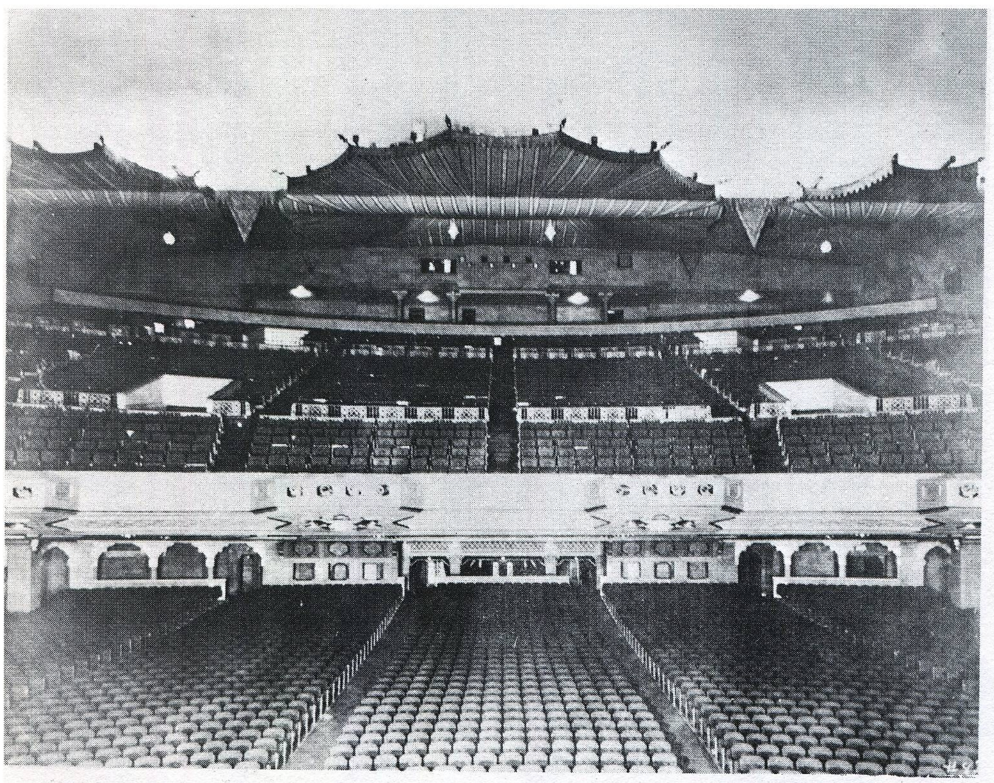
The auditorium's acoustics are among the finest of any music hall. The lack of heavy drapery and the generally smooth finish of the plaster treatment within make the Fox a very reflective and "live" house for sound, be it from the stage, the 4/42 Moller organ, orchestra pit, or audio system. At the rear of the balcony situated overhead is a "canvas" tent catapulted over metal spear supports. This tent – realistically detailed down to the painted "mildew" – is in reality of plaster construction. Its design has not only baffled more than one fire marshall, but serves and was planned as an acoustic reflector which collects and rebounds sound waves emanating from the performance area of the auditorium. The Fox balcony is cantilevered and, at full capacity, is designed to give some three inches.

Instead of preoccupation with plaster embellishment in the decorative sense (as in New York's Capitol and Roxy Theatres), the Fox's detail has a structural source – from rough mud plaster treatment to scored blocks simulating granite. The battlements bordering the sky areas are most believable and are arranged in a tiered fashion.

With modern seating at the Fox's orchestra level, the original 4,504-seat house capacity was lessened to its present 3,934. Original seating remains in the balcony level with cast ornamental iron row ends. The visibility factor from the balcony is optimum due to its pitch and seating arrange-

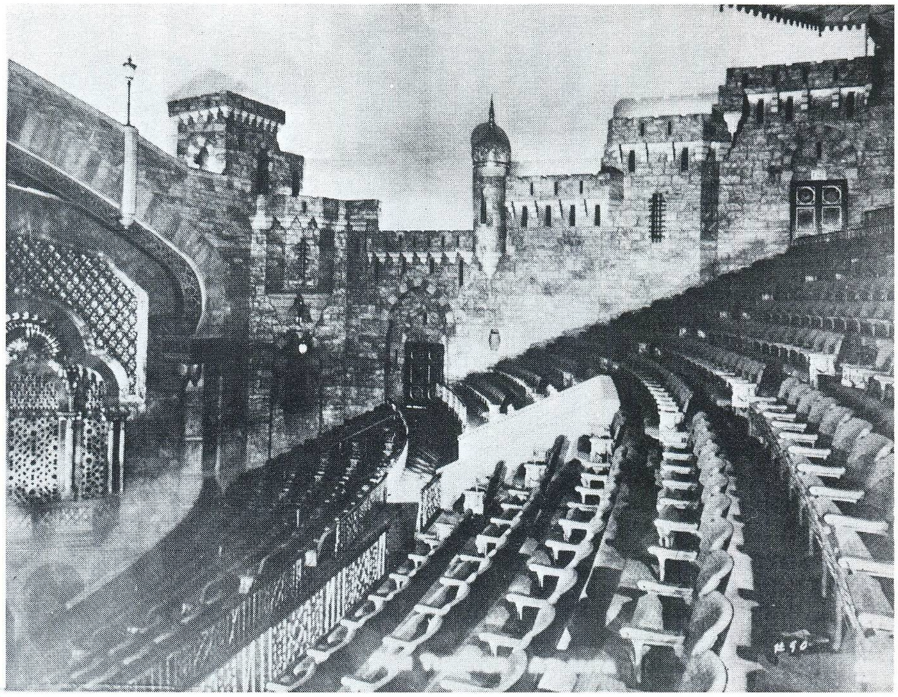
(text continued on page 15)

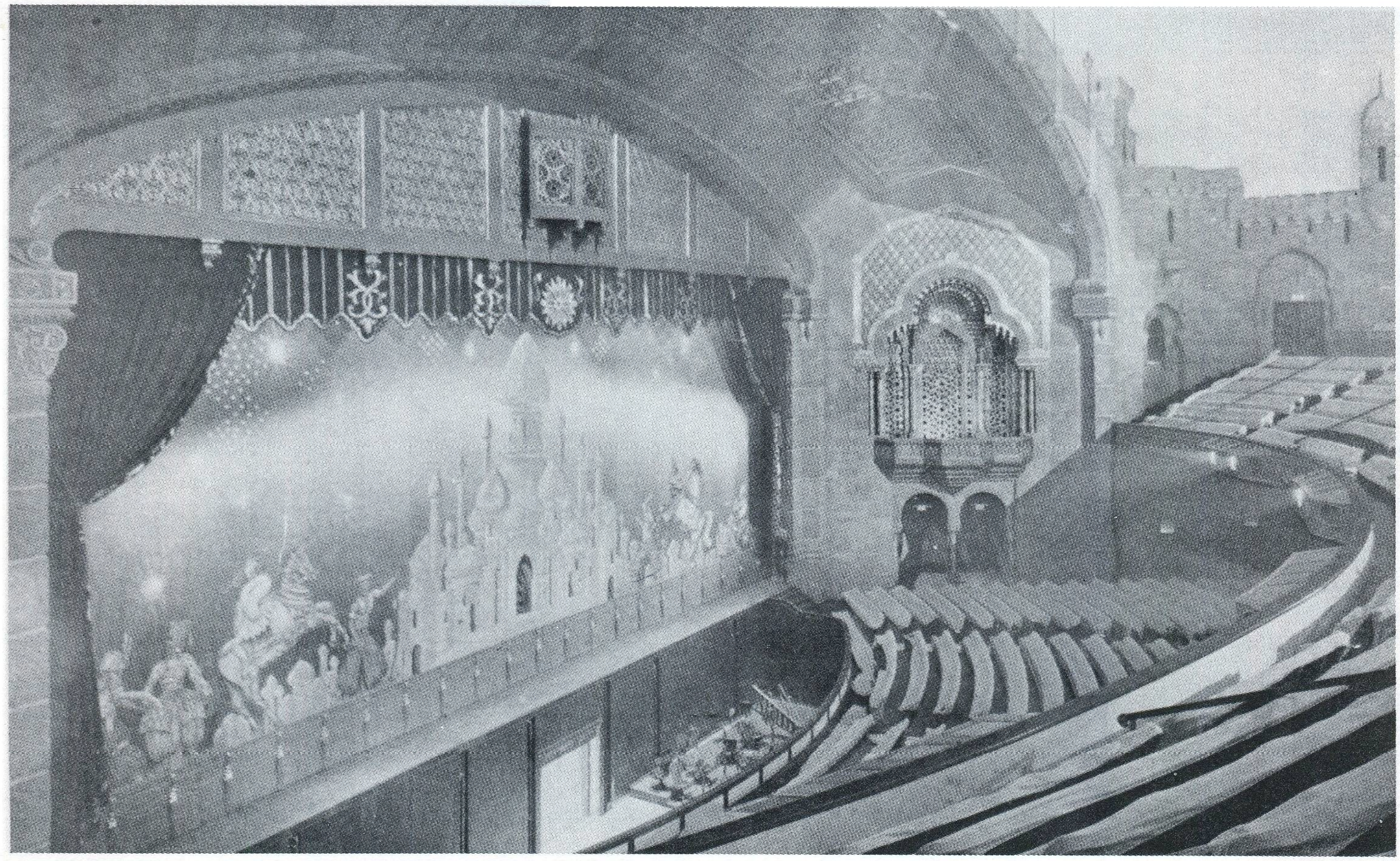




View of proscenium arch and stage. Bridge spanning stage opening gives a touch of London to the auditorium. Orchestra lift is at overture position replete with the 4/42 Moller and a rehearsal piano. —Edgar Orr photo

View at stage center. Above is "canvas" awning which has baffled sound AND fire inspectors. —Edgar Orr photo

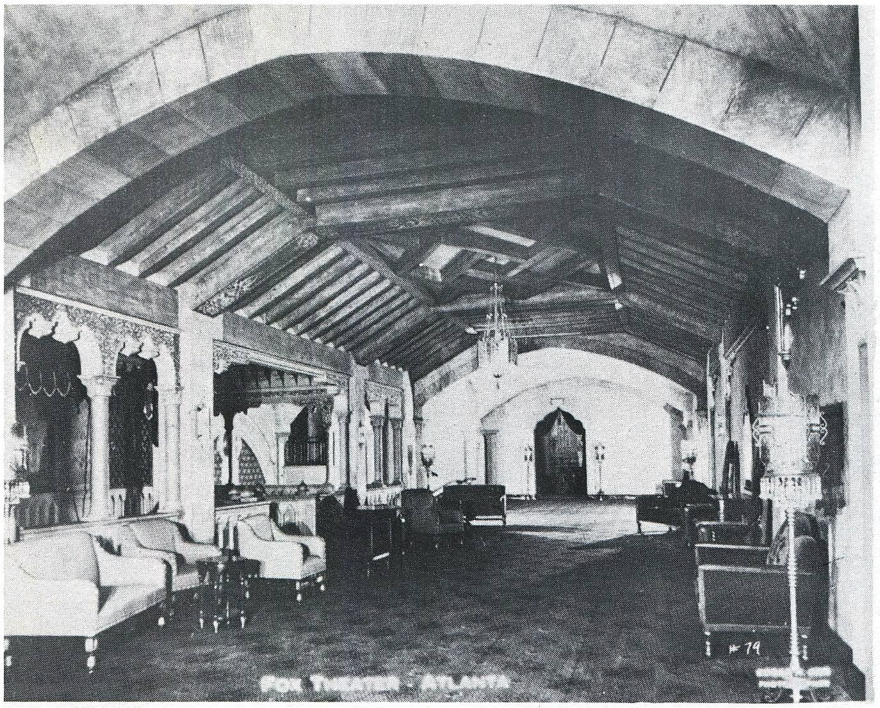




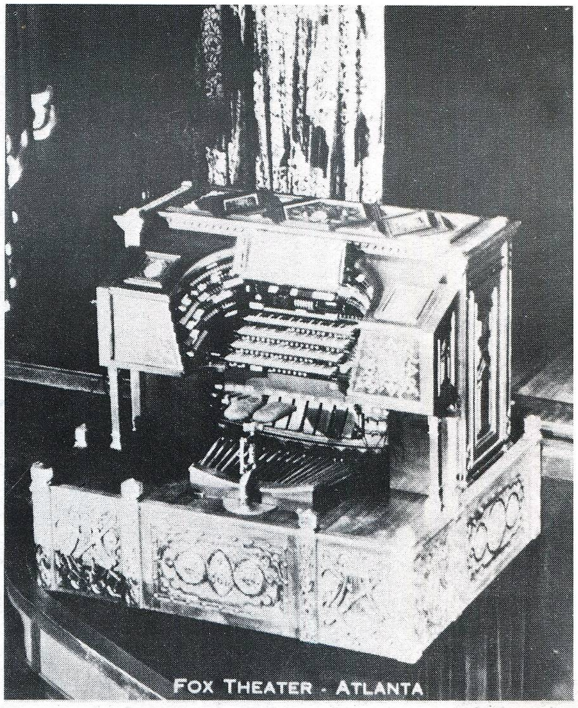
View at balcony level showing detail of minaret and battlements. —Edgar Orr photo

View of stage and auditorium before the house opened. Covering over seating indicates the Fox ceiling was probably being painted at the time of the photograph.

—from The Console Collection



Promenade at mezzanine level. To the left is two-story courtyard. Ceiling repeats "wooden" beam treatment seen in certain lounge areas.
—Edgar Orr photo



The Fox's mighty four-manual, 42-rank Moller organ – a musical triumph. Console is viewed here in its original 1929 dress, and rarely seen ornamental lift apron.
—Edgar Orr photo

ment, though foot area and safety when traveling the aisles under dim light are at a minimum.

The Fox's integral design is such that modern day additions like video broadcasts, sterophonic sound, Cinemascope, etc., were easily adapted.

Ancilliary areas to the Fox auditorium include up to seven levels above stage and four areas below including over thirty dressing rooms with showers, workshops, and the various rooms connected with live stage and musical production.

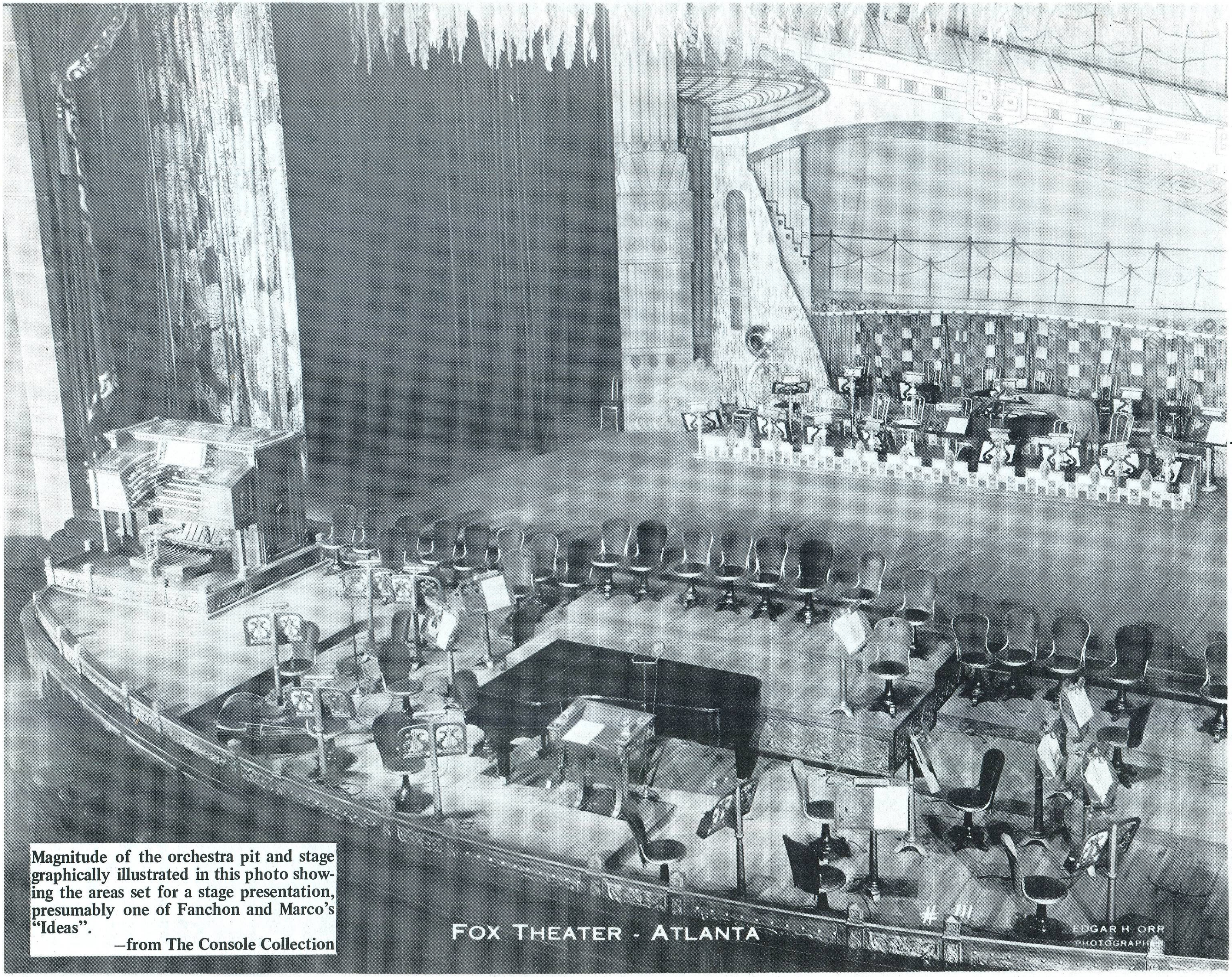
The Fox's mechanical section – much of it centered below stage – includes a central vacuum system, a 375-ton air conditioning installation, and three separate sources of electrical power generation. Elevators include an elaborate configuration for stage use, and separate lifts for organ, orchestra, or solo instruments (as currently used for the Fox organ's grand piano added after 1963).

Other adjoining facilities include two sections of street-front shops, the Egyptian ballroom (originally the Shriners' banquet hall complete with kitchen facilities), a 5,000-square-foot area originally intended as a Shrine Band practice area, a broadcast studio, infirmary, and a rehearsal/screening room with projection booth.

"Although the building (the Fox) is in no way a copy of any one Oriental structure, it tries to embody the entire scope of Mohammedean art," architect Marye told the *Atlanta Journal Magazine* in 1930. Marye, who with partner Ollivier J. Vinour, spearheaded the Fox's design for the firm, compared the Fox – stylistically – to a capsule pilgrimmage to Mecca. The hypothetical traveller, then, would encounter all of the Far-Eastern devices, whether travelling from east, north, or west. This eclectic approach is actually successful variations on a single theme. And the Fox is unquestionably a standing testament to the results of good planning from the aesthetic and technical angles. To quote an early advertising slogan firmly planted in the middle of the "O" in the Fox logo – the Fox is "the last word."

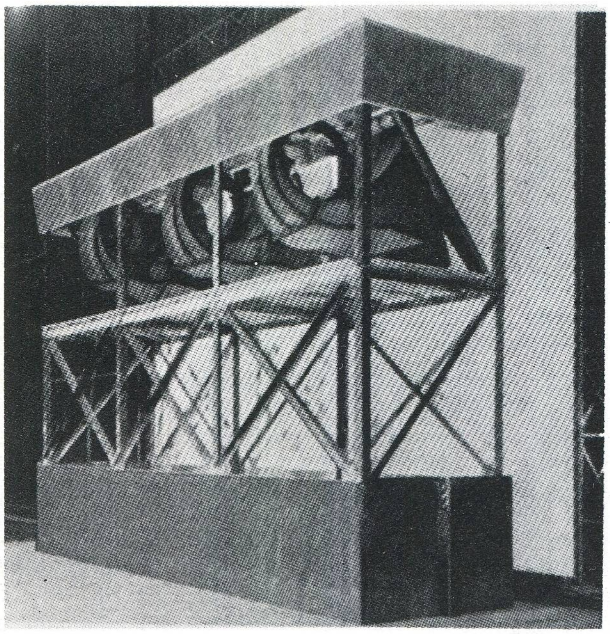
"In all buildings that man has built out of earth and upon the earth, his spirit, the pattern of him, rose great or small. It lived in his buildings. It still shows there."

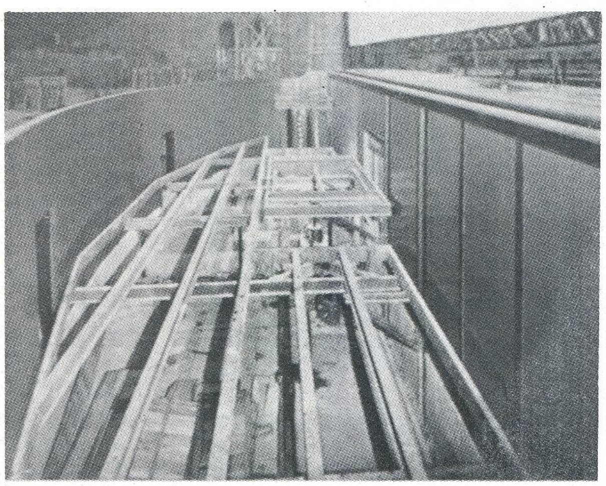
—Frank Lloyd Wright in
The Future of Architecture



Magnitude of the orchestra pit and stage graphically illustrated in this photo showing the areas set for a stage presentation, presumably one of Fanchon and Marco's "Ideas".

—from The Console Collection



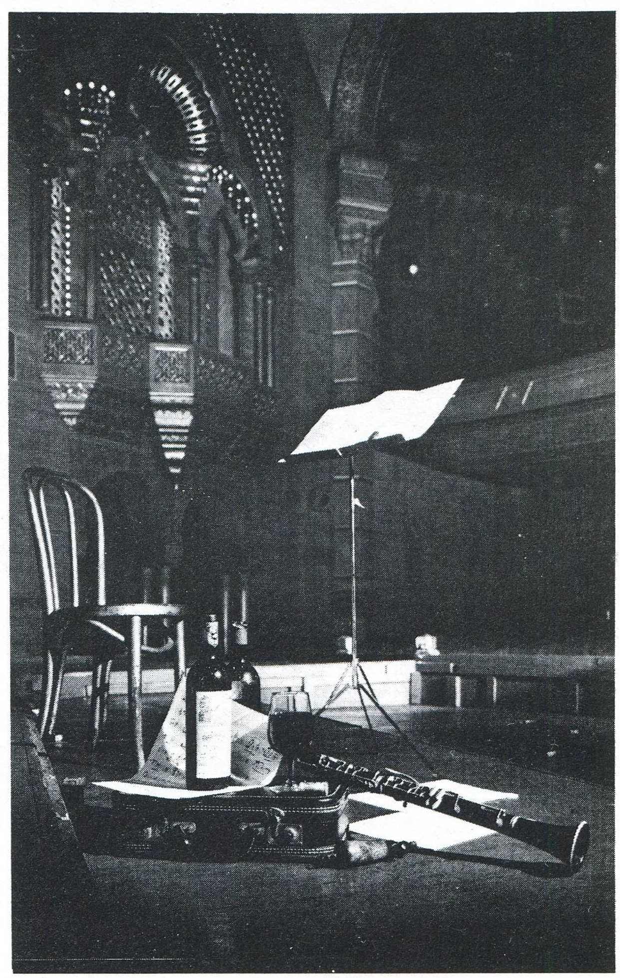


(top) Screen speakers were originally mounted on a separate elevator and lowered during stage presentations.

—from The Console Collection

(bottom) Framing for the orchestra pit elevators. There were three – the main lift, one for the huge organ console and a center lift that presently elevates the grand piano.

—Edgar Orr photo



(right) Courtesy Skinflint's Wine and Beer Warehouse Larry Thomas, photographer; H. Bourg, art direction.



Inaugural Ad for the Fox's Christmas opening in 1929.
—Courtesy Atlanta Historical Society

11. The Fabulous and the Not-So-Fabulous Years
A Brief History

No theatre historian has been able to match the excitement of the late author Ben Hall's written and verbal accounts of American theatre openings. His treatise on the Atlanta Fox is no exception. In jacket notes for the first and only commercial recording of the Atlanta Fox organ[1], Hall wrote:

> The opening night audience (the first show was at 1:30 that afternoon—JCM) surged up the block-long outer lobby, past the illuminated goldfish pools, and into the great foyer where carpeting grew lush underfoot. Some paused to admire the two huge urns—each large enough to hide several of Ali Baba's thieves—that flanked the staircase to the lounges below . . . It had been drizzling and cold outside the theatre, and the damp and chilled first-nighters were not prepared for the surprise that waited for them as they entered the auditorium and walked out beneath the swooping shelter of the balcony. They found themselves in a vast Oriental courtyard, open to the skies of a balmy June night . . .
>
> Promptly at 8:30, the show began. The evening's next spectacular surprise was revealed as, out of the depths of the orchestra pit, rose the biggest, goldest, and most colorful pipe organ console anyone had ever seen. Almost swallowed by the enormous maw of colored stop tablets and gleaming ivory keyboards was the tiny figure of a young woman, Iris Vining Wilkins by name, who launched into a "medley of hits of the day at the console of the $80,000 Mammoth Moller Pipe Organ . . ."
>
> The rest of the program was dazzling. Enrico Leide and the Fox Grand Orchestra soared into view on *their* lift to play "This Shrine of Beauty" (adapted from *Pomp and Circumstance, March No. 1*—JCM) by Sir Edward Elgar and (according to the program notes) Ernest Rogers, of Atlanta's Station WSB. This was followed by a sound cartoon, "Steamboat Willie," which film buffs will recognize as being the first Walt Disney-Mickey Mouse collaboration. Then out on the stage came Don Wilkins, Iris's husband, the Master of Ceremonies; and together they led 5,000 happy Atlantans in a song fest (Ralph T. Jones of the *Atlanta Constitution* proclaimed it to be the first really successful theatre sing-a-long in the city—JCM). The glittering silver and black curtains then opened on the stage show—featuring the Sunkist Beauties of fragrant memory. Fox Movietone News came next, and finally, almost an anticlimax, the feature picture flashed on the screen—a long-forgotten opus called *Salute*, starring George O'Brien, Helen Chandler and Stepin Fetchit.

No doubt from Mr. Hall's descriptions the combination of the Fox structure and its creative human resources gave Atlantans quite a Christmas package at 15 to 75-cents admission.

The Atlanta Constitution described the Fanchon and Marco "Sunkist Beauties" as "two carloads of feminine pulchritude." Their unit show at the Fox marked the forty-first week of performance since departure from the West Coast. Mademoiselle Fanchon, sister to Marco, arrived in Atlanta from New York on the *Crescent Limited* to bring the "Beach Nights" production to perfection with a full-scale dress rehearsal. Mme. Fanchon also saw to incorporating a 12-girl dance chorus of Atlanta "peaches," and announcing to the press forthcoming Fanchon and Marco engagements at the Fox. Following "Beach Nights," Fox patrons would see "Contrasts," "Dance Moods," "Jazz," "Cinderella," "Speed," "Sweet Cookies," and a Southern specialty, "Watermelon Blues."

In addition to Fanchon and Marco's 36 Beauties, inaugural performers—perhaps a hasty tribute to vaudevillian heritage—included the Kitaros, a Japanese acrobatic trio; Davis and LaRue, a comedy team; Art Hadley, musical Cartoonist; Ray Bradley and Evian, a dance team; Maxine Doyle, musical comedy artist; and Jean and Jeanette, billed as the "singing sisters."

In retrospect, excepting the "Sunkist Beauties" and Atlanta's beloved Enrico Leide, the Fox opener was a rather usual and unimportant beginner. The film, vaudeville teams, and alas, even Iris Wilkins, have been long forgotten. There were no outstanding "name" personalities outside of Fox management heralded by the newspapers. But for the Fox's first-day audiences, the show was, nevertheless, a highlight in Atlanta's public entertainment history. The intended target was the masses—those who could adopt the Fox as a temporary escape from the everyday—and the system worked, at least for a brief, glorious period.

The utopian outlook of that December day was to quickly fade. In fact, the groundwork was well underway even as Harold B. Franklin of Fox West Coast Theatres read the Fox statement of entertainment policy from the theatre's stage. The great stock market crash of 1929 had preceeded the theatre opening and made the Fox's promise of weekly all-new shows featuring Fanchon and Marco productions virtually an impossibility. And no amount of congratulatory notes (as sent by Clara Bow and William Powell)

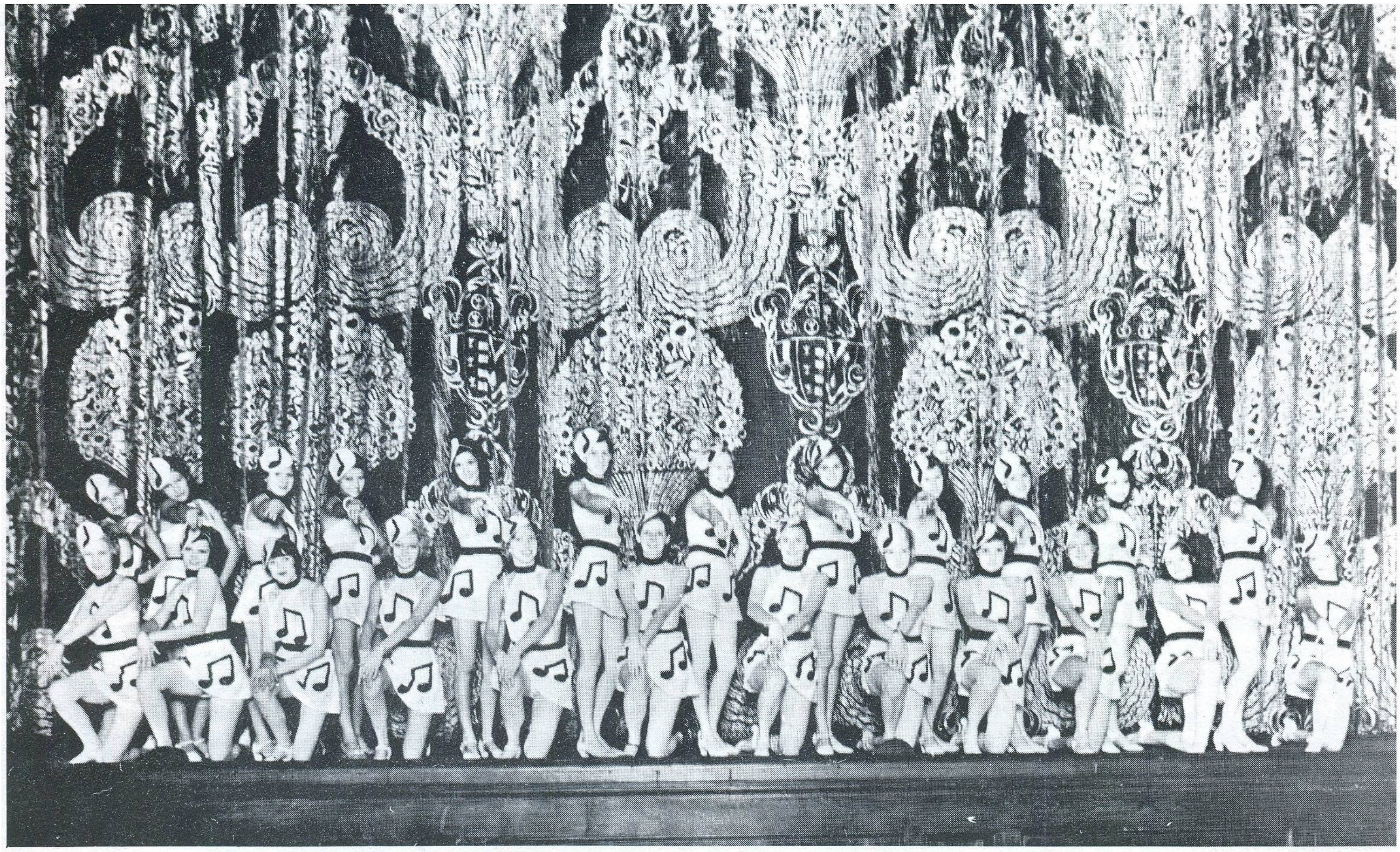


Original cornerstone on Peachtree Street facade . . . reminder of the Fox's Shrine heritage.

—Collection of the author

---

[1]*Here With the Wind,* Bob Van Camp, organist, Concert Recordings, CR-0023.



Reminder of happier days in the Fox's live stage era, circa 1930. "Merrie Maids of Melody" [probably Fanchon and Marco girls], pose before one of the elaborate house curtains.

—Edgar Orr Photo

would help problems that were, in reality, a simple game of economics.

The Fox Theatre Corporation was soon in over its head. Loew's Theatres was a fatter cat at the time, though by no means on solid ground. When the help plea came from the Atlanta Fox, Loew's stepped in and set up a joint operation with the Fox interests in late August, 1930. The deal, consummated under the direction of Oscar Oldknow, a vice-president of Fox Theatres Corporation and an Atlantan, would make the Atlanta Grand (a Loew operation since 1916, and the first Loew house in the South) a second-run outlet, with the Fox as Loew's flagship operation. The Capitol, operated jointly by Loew's and Universal since opening in 1927, passed entirely to the control of the latter organization.

Carter Baron, formerly manager of the Atlanta Loew's Capitol, was brought to the Fox as manager. Baron vowed to continue the Fanchon and Marco productions (joint difficulties of Loew management and Fanchon and Marco themselves left the Fox without its "Beauties" on a regular basis after 1932, though they reappeared at Atlanta's Rialto Theatre in 1934). During this seesaw period, organists Jimmy Beers and Al Evans presided at the Fox Moller.

On August 1, 1932, Loew's officially ceased management operations of the Fox (the theatre actually closed in June of that year). In announcing the change in policy, Col. E. A. Schiller as vice-president for Loew's in New York, touted plans for an all-new Atlanta Grand. The Grand, in reality became only a remodeling job in the shell of the original 1898 theatre.

With the Loew management bowing out, the Yaraab Temple Building Committee had defaulted on its heavy obligations and a receivership to protect the bondholders followed. With the Fox Theatres Corporation bankrupt, who would pay the rent on the original 21-year lease? The Shriners held a meeting in the Fox on June 17, 1932; one of the last assemblies in their headquarters quickly turned "white elephant."

Under the direction of N. Edward Beck, formerly of the Atlanta Paramount and Georgia, the Fox was reopened around August 7, 1932. Beck announced an "all sound policy" with stage shows to follow in the fall. In October of that year, Enrico Leide, conductor of the original Fox Grand Orchestra and of all the other prominent Atlanta theatre orchestras at some point in his past (he was brought from the New York Capitol to Atlanta's Howard in 1920), became manager of the Fox in October, 1932. Jimmy Beers replaced Al Evans at the organ (Evans repaired to the Paramount), and a 20-piece stage band was featured with Dave Love conducting. Stan Portopovitch organized a stage unit, feebly trying his best to match the Fanchon and Marco productions of happier days. "In December, 1932, the mortgage was foreclosed and the theatre was auctioned off for $75,000 to the Theatre Holding Company owned by Yaarab Temple Officers."[2]

After Beck's attempt and the collapse of the Theatre Holding

Robert Foreman, "The Fabulous Fox Theatre" (unpublished paper distributed to "Save the Fox Committee," Atlanta, February, 1974), p. 2. (Photocopied.)

Company, control of the Fox then moved to the city fathers for non-payment of taxes. Movies were supplanted by occasional concerts by the Atlanta Symphony, community concert series, and programs sponsored by the Atlanta Music Club.

On Saturday, September 2, 1933, Robert B. Wilby took a lease on the Fox Theatre (this date probably initiated an agreement with the City of Atlanta that the movie house could be vacated for city functions of bookings upon 45 days notice). Wilby also picked up the Publix houses, the Atlanta Paramount, Georgia (later Roxy), and Capitol Theatres. Jimmy Beers was again featured, and Fox ads asserted the organist to be "back from his study with Jesse Crawford."

After a year of fruitless operations under Wilby, control of the Fox—along with the Paramount, Georgia, and Capitol Theatres passed to the Lucas and Jenkins / Atlanta Enterprises organization. Lucas and Jenkins had been strictly a community theatre company in Atlanta, and this move, in the fall of 1934, was the first venture of the firm to the large downtown and uptown houses.



Promotional write-up on Iris Wilkins and Enrico Leide, from the Atlanta Constitution. *(see page 24)*

—Courtesy Atlanta Historical Society



Atlanta's beloved maestro, Enrico Leide—first conductor of the Fox Orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony, a Fox manager. Leide was immortalized in a life-size bust presented by the City of Atlanta in 1930 which was placed in the Fox lobby. Leide died in 1970.

—Courtesy Atlanta Historical Society
Blackstone-Shelburne, New York, Photographers

Announcement of a five-year lease renewal at an annual rate of $30,000 was made in July, 1935.

Actual ownership of the building was secured in the spring of 1935 by Mosque, Inc.—reflecting a three-way partnership of Arthur Lucas, William Jenkins, and Paramount Pictures. Under the stipulations of Mosque Incorporated's lease to Lucas and Jenkins, the city of Atlanta would get continued use of the theatre as a municipal auditorium for any event announced 45 days prior.

Arthur M. Lucas and William K. Jenkins managed to bring the first stability to the Fox since its opening day. Possibly not through talent but through shrewd cost cutting, the Fox survived under the Lucas and Jenkins banner (with generally an all-screen policy). The company also commissioned in 1946 a remodeling of the entrance loggia, foyer, and shop frontages by Hal Pereira, a prominent theatre architect. Pereira's remodeling was subtle and in complete keeping with the overall plan and architectural character of the building.

Due to the "consent agreement" reached by Paramount/Publix from charges filed in 1940, policy dictated that a theatre owner could not represent a film distributor as operator of a theatre. The Lucas and Jenkins operation (Atlanta Enterprises, Georgia Theatres Company), allied with Paramount/Publix, was finally forced to divest itself of the Fox.

On January 1, 1951, management of the theatre returned to the Wilby interests in partnership with Herbert F. Kincey, and known as the Wilby-Kincey Service Corporation. The Wilby organization had grown and prospered in the years following its initial and futile efforts with the Fox in 1933.

From its Durham, North Carolina, circuit, city manager Noble K. Arnold was brought to take the Fox helm and also to preside as Atlanta city manager over the Roxy and Paramount Theatres.

Under the iron hand of the new Fox potentate, the theatre



The Fox's greatest "potentate," Manager Noble Arnold, shown at the Moller organ console before his retirement in January, 1970. Because of Arnold's interest and support, restoration of the Fox organ was made possible in 1963.
—Courtesy Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine

experienced its most prosperous years, despite the fact that Arnold's arrival at the Fox coincided with the final gasp of live movie house entertainment. As Terry Kay put it, writing for *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*, "By the time he (Arnold) moved to the Fox Theater, . . . movies dominated, vaudeville was a word that tricked kids in spelling matches, touring companies had slowed to an occasional booking, World War II had taken a deep breath and was about to become the Korean Conflict, and the second half of the century was beginning."

Though the Atlanta Fox would swallow previous theatres Arnold managed, this dictator was an experienced veteran, beginning in 1927 as an assistant at Macon, Georgia's Loew's Grand (built in 1884 as the Academy of Music).

Arnold's wife, Elizabeth, who was once organist in a Wilby-Kincey theatre in Selma, Alabama, made for a good introduction for Arnold to Robert Wilby. Arnold arranged an appointment at Wilby's home in Atlanta's fashionable Druid Hills and left with a job. Professing to know little about show business, Arnold's candor had won him a position in a Wilby-Kincey house in Raleigh, North Carolina, in December 1927. Quite a number of live acts and musicians trod the stages of Noble's theatres and he invested in each experience.

Arnold immediately turned to the Fox's 4/42 Moller languishing in the pit upon coming to the Fox in 1951. A hasty restoration was made and organist Eddie Ford was signed as staff artist. No systematic upkeep was employed for the instrument however, and



Lee Erwin gives voice to a Charlie Chaplin two-reel comedy at the Fox during the Atlanta Film Festival, September, 1973.
—Tommy Ford Photo

as Arli Southerland relates, "By 1954 . . . the organ was again in drastic need of repair . . . it was becoming increasingly taxing upon the organist's resources to find a selection, a key, and a registration in which he could get through a number without a series of awkward silent periods."[3]

Southerland states that the organ was last heard publicly in 1954. The period immediately following was indeed a lean one for all theatre organs on the continent, and it would be nearly ten years before the instrument would be heard again on a scheduled basis.

But Noble Arnold had other responsibilities. One was seeing that New York's Metropolitan Opera Company was accomodated in its annual spring season in Atlanta. Staging the Opera at the Fox had begun in 1947 under Lucas and Jenkins' cooperation. With the advent of Arnold, a precise and efficient relationship with the Met, its stars, its trucks of scenery and costumes, and its musicians continued until 1968, after which Atlanta's ponderous acoustical and aesthetic disappointment, the Civic Center, swallowed up the city's opera goers with a boast of more seats.

The Fox's catacomb-like understage areas bewildered many a contralto and mezzo, necessitating the names of New York City streets, oriented with the Metropolitan Opera House, to be scrawled on walls at appropriate points in the building. Traces of these signs exist today below the Fox stage—reminders of the Opera's glittering triumphs in the house.

The Met's productions while in residence at the Fox alone make the theatre a personality landmark. More recent productions included: Joan Sutherland and Richard Tucker in *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1964); Franco Corelli and Renata Tebaldi in *La Boheme* (1964), and La Gioconda (1967); Leontyne Price in *Don Giovanni* (1964), and *Un Ballo In Maschera* (1967); Roberta Peters in *The Last Savage* (1965); and Birgit Nilsson and James McCracken in *Turnadot* (1967). Many of these productions were costumed by Cecil Beaton.

One of the more unique performances at the Fox was *Carmen*, in which the entire Metropolitan unit appeared in street clothes due to a complication in the delivery of costumes and scenery.

But no longer can spectators hold "court" along the frontage of the Fox's across-the-street neighbor, the Georgia Terrace Hotel, as the long-anticipated evenings of gowns and automobiles arriving under the marquee unfold. Ben Hall summed up Grand Opera at the Fox, and the feeling of most of Atlanta's opera-goers and the opera stars themselves, when he proclaimed, "until you have heard *Aida*—and seen it—amidst the Oriental splendor of the Fox, you ain't heard nothing."

At the opposite end of the entertainment spectrum, the Fox sheltered Jerry Lewis (whose behavior over a demand for a certain stage prop gave Arnold cause to forbid booking Lewis at the Fox ever again), Jack Benny in a benefit for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in 1965, concerts by Atlanta Roxy veteran, Albert Coleman, and the Atlanta Pops Orchestra, and Ben Hall listed appearances by Grace Moore, Lawrence Tibbett, Paderewski, Doctor I.Q., and Elvis Presley.

Then there were the *big* movies: *The Robe* (one of the Fox's biggest grossers), *Gypsy, Giant, Guns of Navarone, Auntie Mame, Peyton Place,* and *Shane* (one of the first releases to demonstrate the Fox's great 26 stereophonic loudspeaker complement).



One of the Fox organ's greatest 'poets,' the distinguished organist, Lee Erwin, September, 1973.
—Tommy Ford Photo

[3] Arli Southerland, "The Atlanta Fox Story," *Theatre Organ*, Winter, 1963-64, p. 5.



Composite drawing of Iris Vining Wilkins as she might have appeared at the Fox Moller console in 1929.
—Drawing by the author

Organ Described Despite Early Morning Shake-Up

Diminutive Organist Lauds World's Biggest Console.

BY IRIS WILKINS.
Organist New Fox Theater.

The telephone rang.

"Hello," said a sleepy, muddled voice (mine).

"HELLO!" boomed a cheery voice on the other end of the wire. (I open one sleepy eye and glare at the clock --7:20! Groans and several exclamation points.)

(See topmost cartoon—Eds.)

"We want you to write a story about the organ at the new Fox theater that the layman can understand," continued the early morning disturbance—one of those 'voice-with-a-smile' affairs that can bring out a manslaughter complex that you never knew you had. I've known of cases where people went stark mad over one of those toothpaste smiles at 7:20 o'clock in the morning!

"Wh-what?" I gibber, fencing for time as the other eye opens.

"A story—you know. You're going to play the organ at the new Fox theater, aren't you?"

"I am if I live through THIS!"

"Well, we want it right away—say in half an hour." And with the latter crack, I promptly faint dead away, coming to myself a few moments later to cogitate violently.

Imagine this "happy" assignment when one isn't even awake, no breakfast has been consumed, the window hasn't been closed yet, and the early morning breeze is whizzing in right from the snow-capped peaks of the Alps. (Several more exclamation points.)

I revive in a few moments, conscious of the foregoing, and during my retrospection the Atlanta sun, noted for its warmth and perseverance, breaks through the clouds cheerfully. I got the darn window closed, have some coffee and, in still another few seconds I, like Old Sol, am warming up to my own pleasant task, with the manslaughter instinct all died down. So here I sit with a maze of notes on the largest and finest theater organ ever designed!

(Consult center comic—Eds.)

Where to begin is now my chief worry in the task that confronts me. The console, the "stops," the organ chambers, the mass of complexities known as "effects," the pedals, the number of tabletures—all these have their separate and significant importance, so, like the small boy who explained how to swim: "Give yerself a push, fall in, and there y'are. Ya GOTTA swim."

Take for instance the size of the console, that is, the "desk" where the player sits and actually plays; it is 10 feet wide and 7 feet high—the largest console ever designed. Indeed, it is a thing of beauty and will cercertainly be a joy forever. It gleams **in golden radiance, conforming with the architecture of the theater. Placed as it is on an elevator, it sails up in majestic grandeur which will be visible from every seat in the huge auditorium.**

The organ as an instrument is designed to be a duplicate of a grand orchestra and the builders of the Fox theater Mohler organ, to approximate this effect to its fullest, have included six sets of "violins" known as "strings;" there are five sets of flutes, five sets of horns, three sets of trumpets, three sets of saxophones, three sets of trombones, and three sets of the nearest reproduction of the human voice, the subtle, lovely and truly beautiful "vox humana."

Then there are oboes, clarinets, and a stop peculiarly an organ's and known as a "kinura." It is a high, nasal-sounding affair suitable for oriental music. There are stenophones, tubas, post horns, and chimney flutes.

(No, Elmer, you don't only play chimney flutes on Christmas eve. My! My! How that child can ask questions!)

There are harps and marimbas; there are songbirds and sirens—TWO sirens in case of TWO fire effects!

Does this sound like a large order? Really, I've only begun.

There is a complete set of drummers' traps as you see in the finest and biggest orchestras. There are three sets of trap drums, first a muffled drum, a loud roll, and a drum tap. This is, of course, augmented by bass drums to "match" with cymbals and triangles. There are tomtoms, tambourines, xylophones, bells, Chinese wood-blocks, Chinese gongs, castanets, and Persian cymbals. There are three sets of chimes; there are church bells, sleigh bells, cow bells—ANY kind of bell that you can think of. And without intending to be the least bit facetious, there is a FORD horn and an AUTO horn. Sho'nuff. I'll show it to you if you would like to see it—printed right there on two key tabletures.

And speaking of those key tabletures, how many do you think there are laid out there in beauty of design and in different colors, making quick identification easier? There are 285! This makes possible any group of combinations on any of the four manuels—or to the layman—"keyboards." Two hundred and eighty-five "stop" keys to keep separately in your mind, two and a half octaves of pedals to play all your bass notes—(Remember hearing the boy with the big bass horn or the bass fiddle playing "ZOOM," "ZOOM" in the orchestra? Well, all the organ "ZOOMS" are zoomed out with either your left or right FOOT, never with your hands).

(Watch Iris pound away in the bottom cartoon.—Eds.)

I suppose I will think of about a dozen other things that I know would have been of interest to you but all I've had this beautiful morning—California can't brag about sunshine if this is an example of Georgian-hospitality-sun—is one cup of coffee and the energy to pound out the foregoing on this machine. Breakfast will be here any minute and—

Yes, here it is! . . . See you Christmas at the opening . . . Good-by . . .



The Fox Moller Organ's grand piano (originally from Chicago's Picaddilly Theatre) receives finishing touches from Joe Patten around 1965.

—Walter L. Draughon Photo

In addition to sound movies, Arnold's regime saw the first silent movie to ever be shown in the theatre, *The Eagle*, with Lee Erwin at the organ, in 1969. Author Ben Hall hosted the show from the Fox stage—a source of wonderment since his childhood days at the matinee. Erwin silent film engagements continued after Arnold's retirement: *Wings*, May 6, 1971; *Phantom of the Opera*, May 18, 1972; *The Son of the Sheik* (for the Sixth Annual Atlanta Film Festival), September 13, 1973; and *The General*, October 4, 1973.

Arnold was a shrewd and direct man. In managing the Fox, he never dismissed innovation, but demanded a tried-and-true system when it came to general entertainment policy.

He is remembered for his stern "white glove" inspection of every nook and pocket of the theatre. Boiler room floors were swabbed down as decks of a ship, and it was not unusual for Arnold to pivot a mirror about the lips of the restroom commode seats in his daily cleaning inspections.

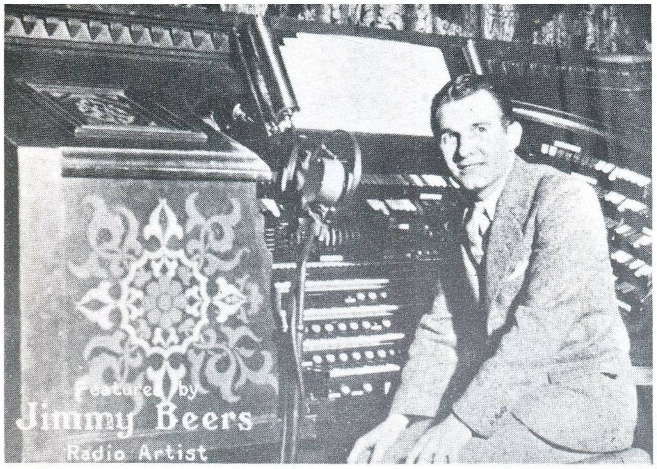
"We're among the few 'remaining seats' from the great days," Arnold told *Atlanta Magazine* in 1963, "and we're going to keep it that way."

Arnold's cooperation in the restoration of the Fox Moller organ commencing after a meeting with American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts' president, "Tiny" James and regional vice-president Erwin Young in December 1962, underlined the manager's convictions about the Fox. In 1963, a small group of Southeastern Chapter ATOE volunteers, under the direction of Joe G. Patten, began a thorough cleaning and restoration program on the instrument. Patten has carefully maintained the organ—without compensation—since that date.

On November 22, 1963, the organ was set for its rise to glory with staff organist Bob Van Camp to do the honors. The newspaper ads proclaimed "The Mighty Fox Organ Speaks Again," but the event was hastily cancelled when the news of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas broke. On Thanksgiving Day, November 28, the Fox Moller *did* rise to glory with Bob Van Camp playing "**Georgia** On My Mind," and the organ was featured thereafter before weekend shows.

Arnold even spearheaded an advertising campaign about the Fox and under his direction, a 12-page color brochure on the theatre was produced. When Arnold left, he took with him the professionalism that earmarked the Fox operation. On January 1, 1970, Noble Arnold's controversial but sustaining regime ended, and he carried with him the industry-bestowed title, "Dean of American Theatre Managers."

In Arnold's last years, the Fox had made a gradual changeover



Fox staff organist, songwriter and WSB radio artist, Jimmy Beers. Note original motiff of Moller console jamb in this shot, taken in the 1930's. Beers later became an executive with Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Company until his death in 1971.
—from ATOS Southeastern Chapter Archives through generosity of Robert U. McKoon.

to family fare movies as a rule, paralleling policy of New York's Radio City Music Hall. Hopefully these films, with their special appeal to children, would fill the theatre. And in many instances, the plan worked. This policy continued under a host of managers, none of whom could settle themselves before ABC Theatres (the parent corporation that absorbed Wilby-Kincey) would transfer them elsewhere.

"Rocking the boat" showed its effects, and the old Arnold gleam soon became a lackluster indifference . . . seemingly the admission of a losing battle reflected by the new management's attitude.

The real break in Fox policy came in 1973, when the theatre adopted a program of exhibiting mainly black exploitation films, as the small Coronet and Baronet theatres down from the Fox on Peachtree had earlier. With the world premiere of the white/black love story, *Together For Days* (May 4, 1973) and films such as *Detroit 9000* (September, 1973), the Fox's clientele changed, but moreover, attendance continued to decline. And the writing was on every plaster wall . . .

In recent years, there have been brief glimpses of prosperity. *The Song of the South*, which originally premiered at the Fox in 1946, set an all-time Fox record in its first week beginning January 21, 1972, with the film's Ruth Warrick appearing in person.

On March 30, 1972, Jerome Hines appeared in *I Am the Way*, the religious opera. A highlight of the production was a special orchestra of the Atlanta Symphony rising to overture level on the Fox's long-unused elevator. Every seat in the theatre was filled.

Susan Hayward, Ernest Borgnine, and William Holden appeared at the Fox in a "second" premiere (the first was in New Orleans) of Martin Rackin's *The Revengers*, June 9, 1972.

J. Hunter Todd moved the entire Atlanta Film Festival to the Fox for its sixth annual week-long schedule of events in September, 1973. The Fox accomodated twofold the capacity of the Festival's former location, the 1,900-seat Symphony Hall, and exposed the theatre to scores of visitors including foreigners, in their first trip to the city. Charles Walker, who with Joe Patten, can be termed the greatest martyr of the Atlanta Fox cause, spent weeks restoring, cleaning, and rejuvenating portions of the house in anticipation of the Festival—without a cent of pay.

A highly successful series of rock concerts under the direction of



Fox Organist, Don Mathis, who came to the theatre from an engagement with the Richmond, Virginia Byrd Theatre Wurlitzer in 1944. Mathis was featured four times daily beginning April 5, 1944 with the film "Lady In The Dark," starring Ginger Rogers. His "Rosary" solo and "Easter Parade" medley were reportedly a hit with Fox audiences—hungry for live organ music since the silence brought by Homer Knowles entering the armed services some months prior. Fox ads for Mathis still touted the Moller as the "largest organ in the world."
—from The Console Collection.

Howard Stein, and more recently, Alex Cooley's "Midnight at the Fox" series, have played to consistently full houses. Cooley, a sincere young businessman vitally concerned with the Fox's future, has brought to Atlanta's young audiences—some of the most prolific of the Fox atmosphere's neck craners and star gazers—such names as: Marshall Tucker, Wet Willie, New Riders of the Purple Sage, Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, and the last scheduled event for the theatre, The Gregg Allman Tour, a new year's rock extravaganza, December 31, 1974.

But above the rock shows and other musical events of the Fox's heritage, the great Moller organ remains unchallenged as the theatre's one greatest asset. Ralph T. Jones, writing in *The Atlanta Constitution*, related how Iris Wilkins got a first shot at the Fox's patrons as she put the giant Moller through its paces before the first show. He added, ". . . as the console rose out of the depths of the orchestra pit, with Iris working arms and legs and shoulders, she made the organ do tricks that amazed. At one moment it chirruped like a lazy canary and a couple of seconds later it



A back-stage re-enactment of conferring honorary degree to Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt, speaker at the commencement of Atlanta's Oglethorpe University, at the Fox, May, 1932. L/R—Dr. Thornwell Jacobs, President of Atlanta's Oglethorpe University; Governor Roosevelt; Georgia Governor Richard B. Russell; Barron Collier of New York; and Atlanta Judge Edgar Watkins.

—Courtesy Atlanta Historical Society

boomed out diapasons that stunned the eardrums and rolled their reverberations down into your being until your entire system quivered."

. . . And the Fox organ still does it! With four manuals and 42 ranks of pipes in five chambers, it reigned for three years (1929-1932), as the largest theatre organ in the world. The Wurlitzer in New York City's Radio City Music Hall received the cup after opening its doors on December 27, 1932. Excepting a few mechanical modifications, new console coachwork, and the addition of a grand piano (originally part of the Chicago Piccadilly Theatre's Kilgen installation), the organ has held forth in its awe-inspiring, but original, state.

As analyzed by Arli Southerland in *Theatre Organ,*[4] the rank breakdown is three tibias, 16 strings, four diapasons, four flutes, 12 reeds, and three vox humanas. The Moller, Opus 5566, was one of the Hagerstown, Maryland firm's last theatre instruments until the recent upstart in building theatre units again by the company.

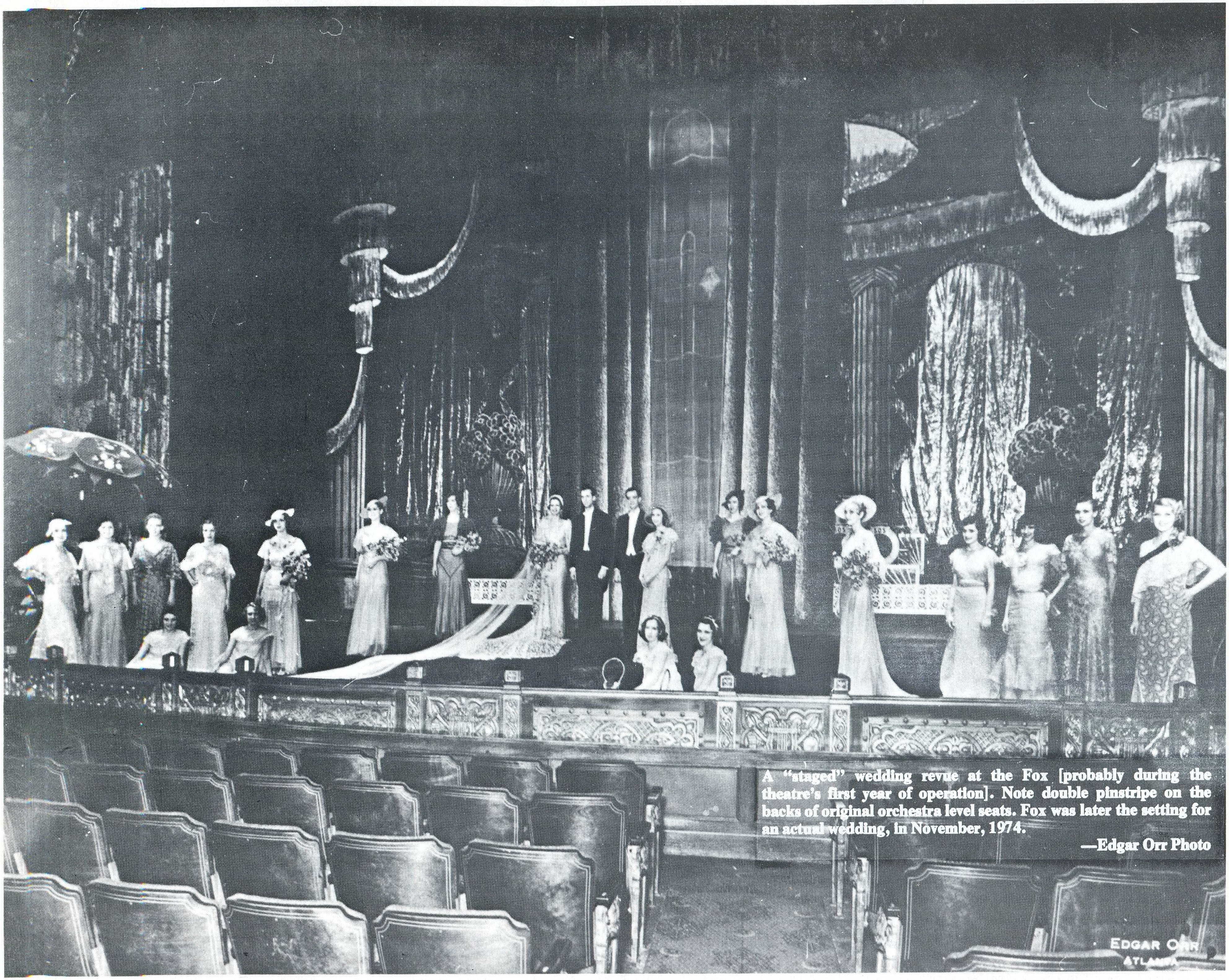
The Atlanta Fox Moller is, without question, one of the finest remaining installations in a theatre, and has become a trademark synonymous with the theatre itself.

Fox organists have included Iris Vining Wilkins (1929),* Jimmy Beers (1931-33), Eddie Ford (1951), Cliff Cameron (1941), "smilin' Al Evans" (1930-32), Arthur Goebel, Don Mathis (1944), "organace" Dwight Brown (1930), Homer Knowles (1943), Stanleigh Malotte, Graham Jackson—featured at many benefit shows and premieres; current staff organist, Bob Van Camp; Lee Erwin in concert and silent film appearances; concert organists Cherry Rhodes and Virgil Fox (in private sessions); Dolton McAlpin, Richard Kline, Linda Kent, and Lyn Larsen (Larsen concertized for 2,500 people on December 1, 1974); and Billy Nalle in a historic theatre organ "first" for the American Guild of Organists (1966).

[4] **Ibid.**, p.

**years in which documented proof indicates organist appeared*

On January 2, 1975, the Atlanta Fox padlocked its doors. With all furnishings in storage, the theatre awaits salvation from the "Save the Fox" movement which sprang to life after news of the theatre's closing reached the public.



A "staged" wedding revue at the Fox [probably during the theatre's first year of operation]. Note double pinstripe on the backs of original orchestra level seats. Fox was later the setting for an actual wedding, in November, 1974.

—Edgar Orr Photo

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Atlanta Landmarks, Inc.

Tom B'Hend
Richard Eltzroth, Atlanta Historical Society
Robert Foreman, III
Jack Goodwin
Mary Lou Grabbe
Jeff McKibben
Barbara Lee Tullos

Atlanta FOX Album

John Clark McCall, Jr.

